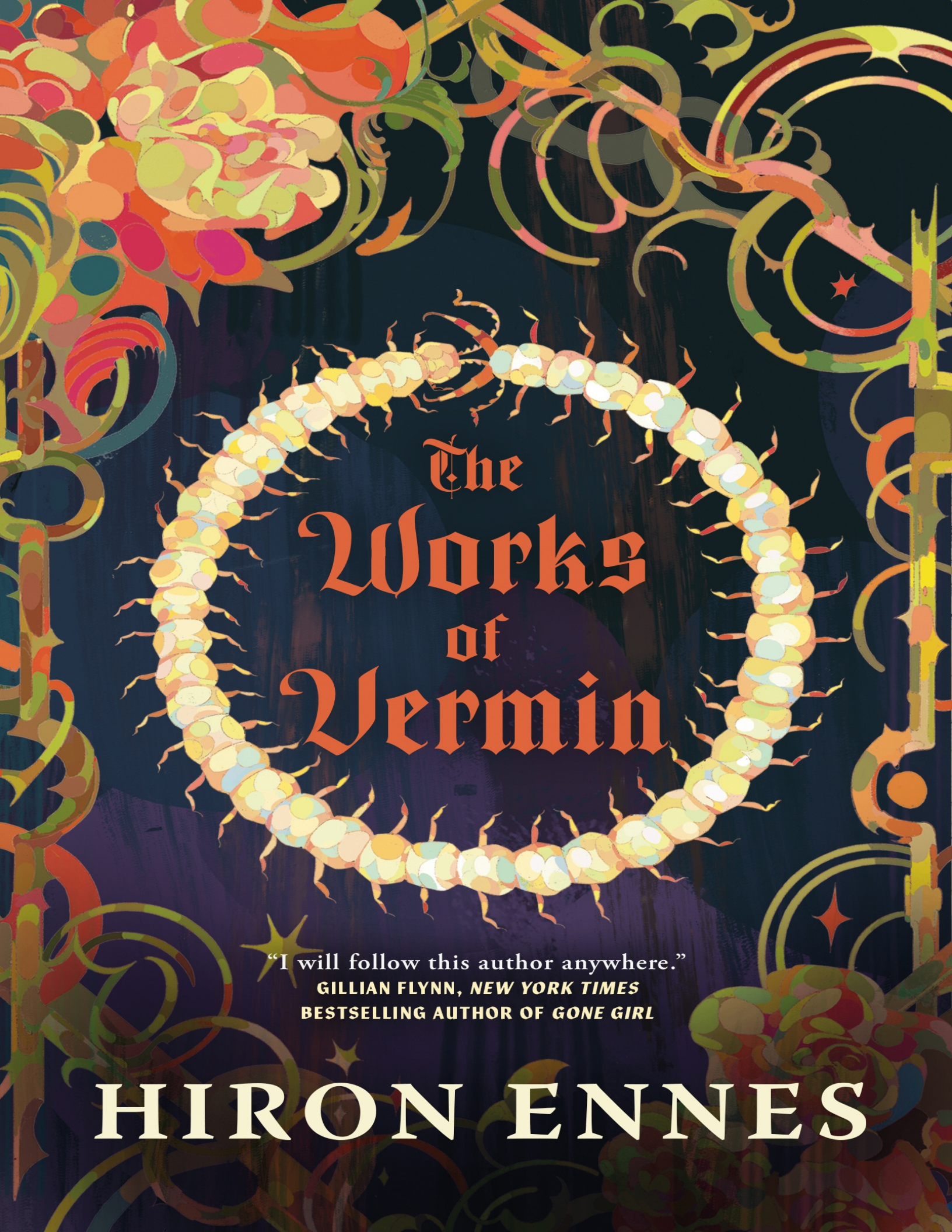
The Works of Vermin
"I will follow this author anywhere."
GILLIAN FLYNN, NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF GONE GIRL
HIRON ENNES

HIRON ENNES

The Works of Vermin

TOR PUBLISHING GROUP
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For Allana, whose invaluable horticultural and botanical advice for this book went completely ignored

I

While this handbook is designed to prepare an exterminator for the common dangers he might face afield, we discourage the reader from viewing it as a definitive and final authority. Consider instead each edition a small molt in the life of a larger organism, for the category of vermin is ever-expanding and always incomplete.

—The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species, *99th edition*

The quickest way to a man's heart may be through his rib cage, as the anatomists say, but the quickest way to his brain is through his nose.

—*Madame Fauniche*

OVERTURE

Tiliard, known as the Deathbed of Tulips, straddles the river gorge like a half-submerged stump. It is a grand bridge of a city, a mesa yawning over a silver tongue of water, underside tangled with a thousand gargantuan roots. From afar, it appears to teeter on its many twisted legs, precarious as a mirage, yet as a traveler approaches, perhaps by horse or riverboat, the city resolves into solidity. The mists clear, the writhing roots fall still, and fissures of petrified bark open to reveal vertical glens, streaks of wildflowers blooming red under the full moon and white under the new. Every season they shed their petals in great sheets; entire meadows migrate, windborne, from the city's highest spires down to the wheels that churn electricity at the waterline, currents alternating with the lunar tides. The whole of Tiliard, claims the poet Fran Montresor, breathes with the moon. It bloats and wilts and dies and regrows, endless as the dreamy depths of the River Catoptric and the nightmarish creatures that crawl from it.

Streetcars rattle along Tiliard's mossy boulevards, hotels and belfries twist skyward, shaped as much by choking ivy as by architectural will. Canals whorl like a giant's thumbprint from the city's heart to its rim—then beyond, dissolving in misty cascades down the mesa's trunk. Cafés line their banks, patrolled by beautiful young women in towering millinery. Here and there a dandy will strum his lyre from a passing gondola, hoping one will pull a bodkin from her headpiece and toss it to him. If he catches it, she will make love to him in his dreams that night. If he doesn't, he is condemned to a lunar month of impotence and dysuria.

Beneath the snaking canals, under the bridges of Conundrum Street and the gash of Splinter Row, the midcity factories pump Tiliard's lifeblood. Trains and lifts creak through tunnels older than history, along rails dripping with ion-charged sap. Runoff oozes through the capillaries and into the naked rhizomes, down into the dangling sprawl of the undercity, where the deaths are lively and the births grim, where racketeers and outcasts spin the wool to weave their plots, and where, for an extra thirty marks, one's dentist might plunge his drill into the brain of a rival.

While the larger roots anchor the city to the walls of the verdant gorge, the smaller spiral down to the water, branching out to filter an endless flow of riverboats. Gilded yachts glide past wormy smuggling vessels; trawlers rumble with bulging nets, devoid of fish but filled with ancient artifacts scraped from the riverbed. The docks teem with rats, workmen, pickpockets, hucksters, and silk-veiled ladies bound for villas downriver. Gnarled ferrymen roll cigars and accost passersby with tales of lost loves and won battles. One will claim to have overthrown an illustrious dictator in a coup thirty years ago, the next will claim to have been that dictator, and both will only be half lying.

Under the cover of clouds of pollen and insects, a slim shipping vessel diverts from its course. It peels away from the docks and enters the mouth of a smuggler's tunnel, a sewage conduit carved into a peripheral rootlet. Its motor dies, and its oars glide into the poison river without a ripple, as if passing from light to shadow to light again. It drifts to a halt in a septic shaft, and a gangplank extends from its gunwale.

Spoils are unloaded and allocated in the rancid dark: perfumes, pigments, porcelain, liqueurs, a burlap-swaddled landscape its seller insists is a vant Wron original. A wine-runner offers a sample of his wares, uncorking a bottle of Dagdrun brandy with a knife still stained in what remains of its vintner. While the scent of sweet plums envelops the dock, aged finely from fruit crushed under the feet of an orphaned child, the last item of contraband descends the plank.

He is a gentleman, or a decent counterfeit, evinced by his lacy gloves and the cuff links barely visible under the sleeves of his traveling coat. He carries no luggage but three blades: an antique saber, which he uses rarely, a razor with an emerald handle, which he uses with some regularity, and an embroidery needle, which he uses constantly—or at least appeared to on his voyage north, pricking away at a square of batiste with such cold focus he deterred even the jolliest smugglers' harassment.

No one questions the man (a paid fare is a fare paid, as the captain says), and he spirals unfollowed up the slopes carved into the meat of the root. He slips into the narrow passageways of the midcity, keeping the lichenous gloom at bay with nothing but a firefly lamp. Factories thud around him, sickly hearts of wood and rust and moss-clotted valves. A foul draft wheezes at his back.

He follows a familiar path, unerring, unwavering, like an ant following a pheromone trail. He hums a popular aria as he weaves through alleys, down erranders' routes, past rotting tenements and conduits of steaming wastewater, refusing to slow, refusing to lift his eyes, until he finds what he's looking for.

He steps into a slitted passage, vine-choked and contorted by bulges of wood. He ducks through the melted grain, through

knots stretched open like howling mouths, and emerges onto a defunct factory floor.

The place is quiet, but there are signs of recent activity. A footprint here and there, a broken curtain of vines between two distillation tanks. He steps to the empty center of the floor, tossing his hat on a broken conveyor belt, and lifts his gaze.

A grid of steel curves overhead. Wrist-thick cables dangle from the crossbeams in two parallel rows, a draped outline of a large, long-bodied creature. Hooks curl from the end of each cord, dulled or warped or snapped off in a struggle. A few frayed cables coil on the floor, baring their teeth at the empty air.

The man nudges a hook with his shoe, removes his gloves, then kneels to take it in hand. He squats, listening to the scurrying around him, the musical conversations of rats. Somewhere beyond the factory walls, a bell rings, and metal groans under a rush of sewage. Compelled by a familiar urge, he presses the point of the hook against his thumb. A thread of blood crawls down his skin, followed by a feeling of release. He reclines on his heels and sighs.

It will be a rough search, he knows, in this monstrous anthill of a city. But he will resort to whatever means, for however long. He will not falter. He has already proven he has the tenacity of a roach.

THE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN OF BORISCH & SONS EXTERMINATION COMPANY

Guy Moulène has once again, due to a blue moon or a bad mood, trapped himself in a child's body. He is ten years old and blindfolded, tasked with ushering a theatergoer to her balcony seat. His ears are stuffed with cotton and his shoes too big for his feet, but he can recognize the sloped carpet under his toes, and he can, by counting his steps, escort any patron to any seat in the theater. As he gropes his way down the aisle, the old woman's hand softens in his own. He comes to realize her fingers are earthworms. Obliged by courtesy, he plucks them from her palm. She adorns him with a lily boutonniere he can smell but can't see, and the overture begins.

Guy twitches on his foam mattress. A hum escapes his throat, and his elbow escapes his dream, driving into his little sister. She wakes; he wakes; both moan the same complaint, but her will, like her jaw, is just a bit stronger than his. Tyro reclaims the linens and curls against the wall, spinning tight as a fly in spider's silk.

Overpowered by a child and exposed to the damp morning, Guy has no choice but to rise. Bare feet streaking dew, he squeezes across the tiny, gnarled apartment and pulls his under-uniform from the slitted closet. He dons his clothes, washes, shaves, retrieves his mask and helmet. With the end of a spare razor, he picks out a clump of yesterday's neurotoxins from a tubule in his respirator.

Guy's employment contract, a thick stack of papers he hasn't seen since pressing his thumb to it years ago, lists his title as *Exterminator*. This amuses him, since the vermin, despite all his fumigants and traps and serrated blades, never seem to die. They make a grand show of it, shrieking from a thousand mandibles as they scatter, bristles raised and pincers gnashing, but they always come back. The small ones wait out the massacre in kitchen cupboards or garden pots, the larger ones retreat to the depths of the river to convalesce. But inevitably, in a week or a month or a century, they return.

Guy's bunkmate, Dawn, is awake well before his namesake. By the time the sun rises under their feet, a green-white coin reflected on the surface of the Catoptric River, he's already oiled his pesticide syringe and polished his blade. Pyrethrin grenades line up at the narrow crack of their window, janky things far below industry standard and dating, Guy guesses, from before the Great Patent Skirmish of 1509. What their arsenal lacks in modernity, Dawn makes up for with an almost supernatural diligence. Nozzles never jam in his presence, fuses never snuff out, an apple cut with his knife never seems to brown. Plants grow better in his proximity, a discovery that has led the company hedge witch to sow herbs, several of which are carnivorous, in the gluey substratum of their front door.

While Guy hunches over the mirror and tries to assemble himself, Dawn flattens the paper on their little table, mulling over the news of an assassination attempt in the overcity. As usual, his eyes have much to say on the subject, and his mouth nothing. Heads will roll like fruit, but he knows those that fall will be the ripest, not the rotten.

"Captain Three says we're climbing down the Root of Abrupt Ends today," he says instead.

"Portentous," Guy answers. He gives up on taming his curls and rattles out his suit, humming away the last notes of his dream.

"Abrupt doesn't mean final," Dawn reassures him.

"But it can't mean pleasant." Guy steps into his suit and rolls down the sleeves. The weave clings to him like rubber, sucking at his neck, his chest, at the loops of debtor's ink that circle his forearms. Threaded with iron vine and plated with woody alloys mined from Tiliard's core, the suit is a hand-me-down from an exterminator who saw sirens in the Catoptric and, one lovesick night, decided to follow them. Only his armor survived the swim.

Dawn offers what is left of the coffee, a lukewarm cup garnished with a struggling fruit fly. Guy swallows both, pulls on his boots, buckles his overcoat, and throws on a bandolier of sulfluoride shells. Impervious to the rattling morning routine, Tyro sleeps soundly on. Even the early chill that gusts through the door does not wake her, though the soot mites will soon enough.

Guy and Dawn slip onto the gangways of the Borisch & Sons company barracks, a warty collection of bulbs dangling from the Root of Joyous Healing. Wind whistles along the river's surface, singing through the vines and shaking the planks under their feet. Neither flinch; they have lived all their lives one misstep away from a long drop and a short swim. Clinging to the creaking handrail, Guy follows Dawn toward the main boulevard. They drop onto solid wood and join the upward stream of bodies, spiraling past carven saloons and pleasure houses, past clubs for the gentry's banished sons and a tavern whose hostess

will, for a decent tip, read one's fortune in the smears of his orts.

Captain Three waits with their tanks at the crotch of Joyous Healing and its neighboring root. She lingers at a war memorial, a tangle of weeping angels carved with the names of those lost in the Battle of Broken Horse. A cigarette glows between the wooden fingers of her prosthetic left arm.

"Got an ugly one, boys," she says, patting her stub against a cherub's anguished forehead. "Moulène, no halving your ass today. Make sure you remember what end of your nozzle the poison comes out."

"I think it's the long one," Guy replies. "Wanna take a glance down it and check?"

She laughs and flicks her cigarette at him. It patters harmlessly against his iron vine. "If you can believe it, the report claims we've got a bug the size of a horse," she says. "Might be a loose swarm. Apparently someone got a good view of it down by the old tobacconist. Put out his own eyes with a compass needle."

"What did it look like?" Guy asks.

"To him?" She grins. "Nothing, now."

She leads them onto the net of catwalks diverging from Joyous Healing. They walk twisted but familiar paths, which Guy had learned in the womb as his mother trudged to and from work on swollen feet, then mastered as an errander, tracing her steps with deliveries or messages in hand. Three doesn't know these walkways like Guy or Dawn, but she'll gladly die before she lets an undercity man lead her.

The Root of Abrupt Ends curls into view, tucked between two larger, sturdier sisters. The thing is made of septic capillaries, and smells like it, a sweet mix of rot and rhizotoxins that comprises the atmosphere of the undercity. They trudge past waste-disposal ducts and moldy apartments and bridges half a squirrel's weight from snapping, until they come to the tobacconist's shopfront. A small market of dubious legality bustles inside.

Three turns her attention to a gnarled alleyway behind the shop. Fireflies scatter at her approach, spilling light into a narrow, viny corridor.

"Place your bets, boys," she says. She cracks her wooden knuckles, shedding a few splinters. "What'll it be today? My money's on chimera millipedes. Gotta be an ugly swarm to make a man take his own sight."

"Pleasure hornets," Guy offers hopefully. He's not a fan of chimeras, testy things who squirt hallucinogenic toxin from bristles along their backs. (*From far away,* he's scribbled in the margins of his *Manual, dellusions are scary. Up close, kind of sad.*)

"Poltergeists," Dawn says, as usual. Every few months, during a job in the dark of the midcity, he catches a ghost or two in the corner of his eye. Ghosts of what, he doesn't know—or at least doesn't say.

Three bends over a mossy manhole cover. She feels for its edges, then, arm valves hissing, pulls free a human-sized plug. A service shaft appears in a column of fetid air. "Whatever it is, it'll be nesting in the phloem," she says. "Masks on."

Her team descends after her, dropping into the tunnel with dampened thuds. The daylight weakens but does not disappear; it glows brown and gold where the wood thins, tracing the winding vermiculations of pipelines overhead. They crawl through sap-clogged passages and pockets of fungus, until the pathway opens into a steamy transpiration chamber. Gargantuan fans turn on the walls, eternal cogs in some ancient, unknowable mechanism. Whatever their original purpose, they do nothing about the stench.

As Guy creeps along the streaks of fan-filtered light, he can count six abrupt ends in this room alone—seven, if he's creative, and on these oddly named roots it does a man good to imagine the unimaginable. A lesson Borisch & Sons learned from a string of bizarre employee deaths on the Root of the Old Dog's Chase Dream.

They circle the room for a while, until Three stops to disturb a cluster of toadstools, unearthing a dark, round burrow, big as a maintenance passage. She kneels to run a glove across its rim, noting the etches of mandibles, its halo of silvery frass. She frowns at its size, the fasciated bubbles in the wood, as if the creature had boiled the root rather than chewed through it. When she shakes the frass from her glove, it bends the light in dreamy loops.

"Not your usual termites," she mutters.

Anxiety cinches Guy's waist. "Should we turn back?"

"Sure, if you want your little sister to eat out of a beggars' trough tonight." She removes her torch and shakes it to life. "Hey Corporal, what's the color for desertion? Red? It'd look good against all that black on your arms, Moulène."

"Captain," Dawn says stonily.

"I'm kidding. Hackles down, soldier boy."

She bends nozzle-first into the tunnel, and Guy crawls after her. Water drums in his ears as he inches toward the heart of the root, following the hunched outline of Three's tank. When the passage opens, he drops onto an iron platform and struggles with his own torch. A shower of blue sparks reveals the grand, ancient phloem.

The enormity of the drainage shaft outpaces his torchlight, its true size only hinted in the metallic reflections of its threaded system of catwalks. Twinned pillars of Catoptric water roar at his sides—to the left, descending, purple with waste, and to the

right, fresh and silver but just as toxic, drawn up to the factories and laboratories by natural laws so arcane that, according to famed alchemist Gilde Vernhardt, even God has forgotten them.

Three advances, uncowed by the fatal black drop on either side. Guy follows closely behind, gripping his nozzle, eyes narrowed. He can't see beyond the falling waters, and fares no better when he turns his gaze to the rising ones. Metal groans overhead; a boulder of rot cascades down with the sewage and clangs against the handrail. The clod disappears in a spray of oily water, but the sound clings to the air, cold and sharp as a knife's edge.

At the murky periphery of his vision, a curtain of mist shimmers and parts. Something dark slithers past him—he turns, but before he can aim his nozzle, Dawn thrusts his curved blade downward. Steel locks between antennae, then glides into flesh. Bristles rise all along the creature's keels, expelling an incandescent cloud of venom, but Dawn holds firm. Metal cracks through chitinous segments, then pulls free, and two halves of a millipede, each the size of Guy's leg, wriggle helplessly along the catwalk.

"*Spiny* fucker!" Three hoots. She inspects the thing, then kicks one of its halves over the edge of the catwalk. Rushing water drowns the scream of its descent. "Chimeras. Knew it. The *size* of the thing. Must be the brood-parent."

Guy glances at the creature's remaining half, though it's difficult to examine while it spews the last of its light-bending toxin, wearing illusion like a carapace. The thing has taken on Tyro's shape, rolling in linens and shrieking with laughter, like she used to back when she found her brother's caricatures funny. His chest aches as Dawn nudges the child-thing into the void.

"Keep searching," Three says. "Nest'll be around here somewhere."

Guy paces the catwalk, torchlight weaving trellises of shadow from the stairways. At one rounded end of the chamber he finds a stubborn streak of darkness, a silhouette that refuses to move with his torch. He squints. A dozen paces below him, concealed in the septic mist, a fissure runs through the wood. Carefully, he pulls a grenade from his bandolier and tosses it. It detonates in a puff of phytothrin. The crack swells, creaks, and expels a mass of insects.

"Impeccable eye, Moulène." Three appears beside him, leaning on the handrail and examining the net of rusty beams around them. Guy, the lightest of the group, recognizes a familiar calculation in her eyes. He tenses when she kneels, pulling her ropes and clips from her auxiliary pouch. "Well, go on," she laughs, snapping one to his belt. "Finders keepers."

★ ★ ★

As they lower Guy toward the fissure, ancient metal squealing at his weight, he rolls a pearl of wisdom around in his mouth. He can't remember which oyster it had come from, but he guesses it might be Vrenecker's *Platitudes in F Maximum.*

"'Cursed is the eye that wanders,'" he sings into his respirator.

"What's that?" Three calls from above him.

"Halt! Here!"

Metal whines, and he lurches downward, jerking to a stop before the crack. He grips his ropes, ensures each is clipped safely at his waist, and probes elbow-deep into the wood. Soft with rot, the fissure is easy to pull apart—a few heartfelt tugs and he wrenches a splintered slab away, revealing an infested recess. A cloud of dust and verminous exudate follows.

He coughs, rattles his most troublesome filter, and lifts his torch to the alcove. It's the width of his apartment, crawling with at least a dozen familiar species. Most are benign: the ubiquitous Whittleston termite, bushels of devilvine, spore-spraying blast mice. A few chimera millipedes scurry among them, dripping with psychotropic toxin. It's an ugly infestation, for sure, but not ugly enough to lose his eyes over.

"Apologies, gentlemen," he mutters. He adjusts the stops on his cannulas—phosphates for the millipedes, holy water for the devilvine, a dash of neem for luck—and sweeps his nozzle over the swarm. As the alchemical cloud swallows the recess, his victims dive for cracks, releasing a chorus of squeaks. Guy shrugs off a shiver. Four years in this business and he still flinches at the suffering of pests.

Adults, larvae, plant, animal, fungus, all the usual hybrids of each, he leaves nothing untouched. "Down to the last *egg*!" Eir Borisch likes to holler into the barracks' sap-powered announcement system, usually at night, and usually after enjoying a few glasses of Dagdrun '88 at his desk. "No son of my father leaves a job unfinished!"

As the swarm thins, the recess takes shape in his torchlight, a diorama of rotting splinters and fungus. Guy replaces his nozzle, allowing the fumigant to disperse, and slides into the alcove. Among the sewer-fox droppings and silver frass, he finds an abundance of nesting materials: discarded newspaper, moth-eaten textiles, a small marble likeness of a saint, her face cracked and scraped as if by teeth. He supposes the cavern may have once been a refuge for a mad prophet, or an escapee from Strangleroot.

A shadow sweeps across his vision. He turns to the farthest wall of the alcove, adjusting his nozzle to clear whatever remains of the swarm, but stays his hand. The wall is moving—not with the rustling of a thousand pests, but with a synchronous lurch. His stomach turns when he pieces together that he is not looking at many tiny movements, but a single large one.

Segments of an exoskeleton roll by him, slowly at first, like the windowless cars of a departing train. Chest tight, feet tethered, he stares at what he is increasingly sure will be his abrupt end.

The centipedal body unfurls, impossibly long, impossibly armed. Terga loosen along a spinous chain, each large enough to shield a warhorse. A pair of thick legs appears, then another, then another, then another. Bristles spiral along every surface, an uncanny carpet of iridescence rippling from the tip of its tail to its dark, eyeless head. Two kinked antennae twitch as the creature turns toward him, segment by segment.

Its face opens. A black slit appears at the center and ripples agape, pulled apart by a stretching ring of mandibles. Mucus slings between the rims of its mouth, an inverted funnel terminating in a round void of a throat. Something like breath wheezes through it, and Guy hears the first tremolo of the overture to *Larbella.*

His gasp unsticks from his lungs. His legs snap into motion, and he stumbles toward the open shaft, raising his pesticide nozzle and twisting open the cannulas with shaking hands. "Up!" he cries over the roaring sewage. "*Up,* Three!"

The creature follows, weaving between fungal stalks and broken porcelain. From the depths of its face-funnel, a long tongue unfolds—or something like a tongue, barbed and dripping and thick as Guy's arm. It spirals toward him, unfurling from a base slick with glands, too close, too clear in the sputtering light of his dropped torch. A canister thumps into his emergency barrel just as his heel finds the lip of the fissure. The soft rot gives under his weight, and he tips into empty air. His nozzle cracks, and a canister spins toward the creature, swallowing the alcove in sulfur.

A dark streak whips through the haze. Something snaps taut at his temple—his rope, a respirator tubule, the skin of his ear. Pain shoots across his face, a high-pitched ring vibrating down to his jaw, the back of his neck, resonant as a struck chord. Fumigants flood his mask, burning his lips, his mouth, his scrunched eyes.

There is a moment of stillness as he falls, inverted and weightless. Then, he swings, and his back meets something hard. Blind, deafened, he rolls to a stop and gropes for his nozzle, for his knife, for a handhold. He is still groping when a pair of mandibles wraps around him, heaving him limp and helpless into the solid warmth of a mouth.

He tries to cry out, to call for help. He wants to curse the monster, to die with an insult on his lips—but the most he can manage is a feeble, horrified laugh. His mother was right. He's going to die in a gutter. Like his father, but instead of a pair of fabric shears to the back, it'll be a bug bite.

And Tyro—poor Tyro will be livid at his wake. When his thumb name is spoken thrice and the lunar priests dump him—or whatever pieces of him can be found—into the Catoptric, she'll scream and wail and kick. And when it's over, when he joins his fallen coworkers at the bottom of the toxic river, a new hire will inherit his iron-vine suit, and she will inherit his debts.

That image alone motivates him to struggle. He won't let the thought of her ink-blackened arms be his last. He won't consider the marks spreading from her wrists, proliferating as she grows, new loans taken on to pay back the last, and the last, and the last, elbow to shoulder, neck to ankle, until they have to shave her head to make room for more debt, moving to her lips, her tongue, the whites of her eyes, the soft beds of her fingernails—

Eyes clamped shut, deafened by the ringing in his ear, Guy squeezes his aching ribs, pushing out the last of his breath. He squirms, striking out when some sort of appendage hooks under the straps of his mask.

A hand catches his wrist, and his helmet comes away in a puff of iridescent gas. He gasps, coughing out the last of Borisch & Sons' Proprietary Aerosolized Formulation, and his senses realign. The mandibles around his chest soften to Dawn's arms. Tyro's debt ink flattens to harmless, crosshatched catwalks. The musical stridulation of the creature fades with each throb of his ear.

"Talk to me, Guylag," Dawn says.

"Shit, Moulène." Three appears over Dawn's shoulder. "You dead?"

"Dead—enough," Guy coughs. "That thing—big one."

"What thing?"

"You didn't see it?" He hesitates. "Bigger than a horse. Several horses. *Streetcars.*"

"Cute," Three mutters. "Guylag's seeing dragons. Check his pupils, Corporal."

"It *was*—"

"He's bleeding." Dawn tilts Guy's ear toward the light. "He hit his head."

"Well then, hit it again," Three says. "See if you can't rattle his brains back into place."

"It had some sort of stinger," Guy says. "Shit, it *stung* me." Instinct pulls his hand to his ear, but Three catches his dirty glove.

"Let me see." Her wooden hand clamps over his wrist, while the other brushes aside his curls and spreads open the wound. "Well, *something* did. Chimera, probably. No wonder you're yapping bugshit."

"It wasn't a chimera," he rasps.

"Whatever it is, it's not there now." Three pulls out her canteen, uncorking it over his ear. "So as far as we're concerned, job's finished. And the only way to unfinish it is to check. We don't want to tarnish Borisch's stellar reputation, do we?" She

caps her bottle. “We’ll stitch this shut later.”

“Captain,” Dawn starts, “we should take him to the infirmary.”

Guy shivers. Policy dictates he present his injuries to the exiled veterinarian who acts as Borisch & Sons’ company physician, but there is little point. For most stings, like other occupational exposures, either no treatment is needed, or no treatment will work. Prognoses are reached when Dr. Nic shuts her eyes and flings her scalpel at a painted gameboard.

“We could,” Three sighs, “if he wants to file an incident report. And with all his contract violations—”

“No,” Guy says. “No report.”

“That’s the spirit. Now, pull your ass together.” She hauls him to his feet. “You’ll be fine. Never saw a chimera kill anyone. You’re gonna *want* to die in an … about an hour or so, but you won’t. Probably.”

“Captain,” Dawn says. He lays his hand against the nape of Guy’s neck and gives a firm squeeze, steadying him as he once did when they were errand runners, when the slightest stumble might’ve sent him flailing into the Catoptric.

“Honestly, worst poison in there is BSPAF,” Three says. “Hose him down. I’ll squeeze Nic for some nightshade—Dawn, keep an eye on him tonight. See if he starts leaking out both ends and talking to ghosts. Don’t let him follow any visions. Can’t have him running off a bridge chasing his dead ma, like Matteson.”

“*Captain,*” Dawn mutters.

Guy’s head swims, pain vibrating through his ear. “I’m fine,” he rasps.

“He’s in your charge, soldier.” She clasps Dawn’s shoulder, and her gold tooth glints. “Try not to let him croak. And if he does, at least make sure he doesn’t leave a mess.”

A GENTLEMAN OF THE VOID

They say all good stories begin with a dead man. That's the phrase, isn't it? Every good show begins with a death and ends with a marriage. It's how the great dramatist Aufhocker puts it—or at least the people who confidently misquote him, and there really isn't a worthy distinction between the two.

No one has died yet, at least not in Aster's sight line, though she can barely see past her own false lashes. The broad amber windows of the Judicial Palas trap steam like a greenhouse, and the civilian gallery is swollen with bodies. Ladies fan themselves with ginkgo leaves, diffusing their pheromonal perfumes, while their dates wipe fog from opera glasses. As the accused is brought before the tribunal, panting under a hood heavy with sweat, the high magistrate lifts his gavel to scratch at a glistening age spot. Even the floor has begun to perspire, oozing dewdrops from the marble loop of the BGS company sigil. If nothing else, someone will die of heatstroke.

Aster is here, suffocating alone at the show trial of a hapless stranger, because Elspeth has once again publicly stood her up. Attended by Tiliard's most distinguished magnates and guaranteed to end in a tasteful execution, this is the kind of legal circus at which the Laurel Chancellor's portraitist (and fiancée) would be expected to show her face. That is, Aster supposes, precisely why she hasn't. Elspeth is diligent in upkeeping her reputation for inconstancy. She wouldn't have one stiletto out of the cab before making a diversion of some boy, or a cabaret with a decent band, or a parade marching down the Rue Petunia with a mist of champagne in its wake. It's her brilliant caprice, after all, that crowns every brushstroke of her paintings—or would, if she ever finished one.

Aster vows to fill the empty seat beside her with her own diversion, even if she must invent it. A story of a missed adventure is the only arrow that can pierce Elspeth's maddeningly shapely hide. If not remorse, the bitch is at least capable of envy.

Unfortunately, the trial chugs along smoothly. The magistrate is curt, the defense absent, and the accused so thoroughly damned that the only point of contention is his method of execution. A lunar priest steps forward, draped in tinkling pearls, and proposes immolation. A BGS lawyer invokes tradition and suggests he be fed to the Palas's carnivorous tulip beds. The audience applauds when a heckler demands he be dressed in costume and made to fight for a pardon onstage.

The condemned himself has little to say, mostly because the overeager captain of the Tender Guard has already cut out his tongue. His is no great tale lost. His approach is uninspired (infiltrate the waitstaff at a state luncheon), his weapon of choice clichéd (lead seven-shot pistol). Gun in one hand and a flute of Sullen Head mineral water in the other, he strode up to the city's most decorated general and discharged two bullets directly into the panoply of medals overlying his heart. He left no manifesto, no detailed plan. Whether the assailant is a stillborn revolutionary, a madman, or an assassin hired by someone in the Tiliard Cabinet, it won't change his fate. The only thing that might is the Marshal Revenant's mood.

As always, the Marshal sits above the judiciary in his bony headpiece, exuding a scent worthy of the arbiter of the court. It's a strong concoction, but Aster knows him well enough to see an aura of contempt ripple through his veneer. He's still sore in the ribs, and Aster can hardly blame him. He was shot only last week.

The judges deliberate. The gallery fills with whispers. Clerks pass by to refill wineglasses and offer cigars. The Marshal's frown suggests the execution will not be swift, and the magistrate's grin suggests it will not be painless. Aster guesses it will be some sort of dismemberment, but she doesn't have the heart to place a bet with the bookmaker.

She sighs, curls her toes in her pumps, and nearly jumps from her skin when she sees the empty seat beside her has been silently, suddenly filled.

The man is a stranger, dark and lean, his long profile made longer by a pretty, dated top hat. His fashion lags by nearly two decades, but somehow this only accentuates that kind of handsome, ambiguous agelessness most often seen in men straddling thirty. His vest is garishly embroidered, his rapier antique, and his boutonniere, a pair of flared parrots' wings, gives the impression of a bird just crashed into a storefront window. There is something unnerving about him, and uncomfortably *present*—like a living man might appear to a ghost.

Uneasy but pleased, Aster proffers her glove. When he takes it, his thumb brushes against hers. A charming but still egregious faux pas.

"Asteritha Vost," she says, suddenly aware of an unscratchable patch of sweat between her breasts.

"Mallory."

She looks him over and resolves not to tell him she recognizes the name. Mallory vant Passand has been an object of amusement passed around the rumor mill for a few weeks now, attached to a personable but evasive transplant from the countryside. No one agrees on why he's come to the city, or from where. On Tuesday, he is an eccentric artist looking for patronage; on Thursday a deposed prince come to claim his inheritance; Saturday a huntsman ferried in from some alpine hamlet. Today, Aster supposes he's a wastrel grown, the ward of a mysterious benefactor whose untimely death has left him abruptly and unfathomably rich. There is no better explanation for the rift between his lopsided smile and his pompous dress.

He releases her hand, and she pins down the source of her unease. He is devoid of any hint of perfume. No suggestion of lavender or beetlewort, no pure scents, no cheap knockoffs. Oddly enough, it seems the man she perceives is precisely the man who sits beside her.

"I'll be damned," she mutters, hoping her own perfume masks her tone.

"What was that?" He tilts his ear, hidden under sleek curls not quite black, not quite brown.

"I said you're a little late for the trial."

"I know," he sighs. "But not too late for the sentence."

She wonders if he's here via the Tourism Bureau, which insists on directing visitors toward the Palas (ever failing to mention one is as likely to stumble into a firing squad as a parade). Perhaps he's a political sightseer, a margrave or investor hoping to watch the régime change with the leaves. He must know that for the past seventeen years, all of them have left sorely disappointed.

"I meant to come earlier," he says, dabbing at a rip in his glove. "But I was hit by a car on my way over."

It takes Aster a moment to process the words. "Oh?"

"You know. Three wheels and a turret." His smile widens, off-kilter as the rest of him. "Fortunately, I was hit by the wheels, not the turret."

"Really." Aster narrows her eyes, trying to tease a thread of untruth from his words. She can't read him. He's too flat-scented.

A bell rings. The Marshal waves away the flock of adjudicators, then stubs out his cigar on a nearby monstera leaf. Boots shining with dew, he steps forward and announces the sentence: strangulation, accompanied by string quartet (a profound act of mercy, compared to the brass band). Justice will be served shortly before the hors d'oeuvres.

A giddy buzz engulfs the crowd, invincible to the magistrate's gavel. Chairs squeak as gentlemen rise to collect their bets; clerks scurry to retrieve the wine. The Marshal turns to his bailiff, who kneels at his feet and presents a pair of black gloves. He peels them from their tray, expressionless under the maxilla of his headpiece. He has told Aster many times he is not fond of the garrote. He finds the sound of the screws irritating.

"Does the Marshal personally execute all his assassins?" Mallory asks. There is a boyish glint in his eye, the same that appears in nearly every young man's when they get a good view of Tiliard's grandest hero, whether they admire or despise him.

"If he did," she mutters, "he'd hardly have time for anything else."

Aster is surprised at how pleasing she finds his laugh. She wonders how Elspeth might follow up, how she would tease a good-looking stranger into inviting her elsewhere, goad him into offering his arm. Something succinct and effortlessly charming, no doubt.

Aster spends a moment forming the perfect quip. She adjusts her headpiece, gathers her wits, turns to Mallory, and expels a wet cough.

She doubles over, mortified, and covers her lips. *Oh dear,* she can almost hear Elspeth laugh. *Very much like you to open your mouth to flirt and have a lung fall out.*

"Excuse me—" She turns, hacking, but has nowhere to spit. Groping for a serviette, she scans the aisle for an escape. Nearby spectators attempt to distance themselves, but the seating is too dense. They can only hide behind fans and sleeves and, for those that recognize the hallmark musical wheeze of her affliction, offer pitying looks.

Something soft presses into her glove. Mallory's hand presents a square of embroidered batiste. Bewildered, she stares at the handkerchief, unsure if it is an offering of kindness or a sexual proposition. Before she can decline, the next spasm slithers up her throat.

"Are you all right?" Mallory asks.

"Just a—" She tightens her stomach, but her lungs are more stubborn; she takes the handkerchief and hacks into the embroidery, defacing the elaborate patterns and impeccable monogram. With one hand, she gropes through her purse for her atomizer, while the other holds the fabric against her face. As she gasps, a strange, almost soothing air weaves up from the fibers. Her breath cools, and she uses the lull in her fit to spray two doses of medicinal perfume onto her throat. "Fine soon," she chokes.

Suits bustle around the tribunal. The canapés have arrived, along with the execution post. The quartet hoists their

instruments, and two Tender Guard carabineers wrestle the condemned against the post. The Marshal feeds the strap over his neck and tightens the collar.

"How long does it usually take?" Mallory asks.

"A few minutes—at most," Aster says. "Less if he struggles."

"I meant your medicine. Should I escort you out?"

She almost smiles, almost manages to swallow her next cough, but it bursts up her trachea with a flutter of wet wings. She traps the quivering thing behind Mallory's handkerchief while he pulls her to her feet. She is dizzily pleased to note that he is taller than her only by virtue of his hat, which extends a few inches above the highest feather of her headpiece.

Just as they squeeze into the aisle, the music begins. The Marshal Revenant turns the crank as Mallory pushes past coattails and serving trays. The crowd parts, muttering words of pity and disgust. He ignores them, hands firm at Aster's elbows, breath warm against her neck. She leans into his urgent touch, his scentless collar. When her next fit comes, it isn't entirely unfeigned.

The hall adjacent to the courtroom is wide, cavernous, but quiet. Aster slows among the columns of amber glass, stopping by a fountain to hack a few gray dregs into the handkerchief. Mallory kneels beside her, hand on her back, either ignorant enough to extend comfort to a walking contagion, or wise enough to know she isn't contagious at all.

A pair of Tender Guardsmen passes through the hall. The green glass of their helmets glints at the sight of the Marshal's hireling being manhandled by a stranger, but Aster waves them away. They return to the courtroom door just as a muted cheer spills from under it.

"Don't let me keep you from the show," she tells Mallory, clutching the handkerchief to her chest so he can't see what crawls inside. "I'll have this washed for you. Go on."

"It's fine," he sighs. "I've seen enough. I'm not so eager to watch someone die that I'd just…" He breathes a chuckle. "Watch someone die. Should we find you a doctor?"

"Oh, no. Nothing to be done."

He furrows his brow. His eyes are dusty gold, like a beam of light in a grain silo. Aster has never seen a grain silo, but this does not deter her imagination.

"Would you like a cigarette?" she ventures.

"*I* would." He watches her drop his handkerchief into her purse. "But are you sure you should…"

"Doesn't matter. A little smoke can't make it any worse."

Maybe it'll kill whatever's growing inside you, Elspeth used to say, back when they stole cigarettes from the nurses at the Sanitarium and burned through them, one by one, at the open windowsill.

"Whatever you say, vralen," he says.

Aster leads him up a spiral staircase to one of the Palas's many balconies. The pillars are braced in gold, carved with fractal stems and bulging marble petals of Revivalist design, as if they had sprouted spontaneously from the rubble of the last coup. Dozens of chandeliers dangle from marble branches, a glimmering canopy of soft green light.

Hidden among the glass foliage, Aster fishes through her purse for her pearl case. She taps out two thin sticks of tobacco and hands one to him. As he pulls a matchbook from his breast pocket, she wonders if he shares her contamination. Elspeth always says their kind have an uncanny way of finding one another, especially the ones who hide it well.

"So," she starts. "What brings you to an execution, Eir vant Passand? Surely there are more civilized distractions for a newcomer to our fair city."

He leans over the banister and eases into a smoky sigh, staring into the arched jungle reflected in the foyer's pools. "Is it that obvious?"

"Afraid so. You've got the lilt of plum country. And you're dressed like a tinsel-bug."

He stills. For a moment she thinks she's offended him, but when his laugh comes, it's startlingly genuine. "I've got a lilt?"

"Sounds like it's from Dagdrun."

"Good guess. My father had a little villa there. Haven't been back in a while, though."

"The very lip of the wastes," she says, a bit dreamily. She knows nothing of Dagdrun but what the old master Rebau painted of it, orchards of twisted wood, jet-black in the wispy sunset. "Why so far from home, country boy? Recreation? Education? Misfortune?"

"Loose threads, mostly," he answers. "Tying up a family matter. I'm looking—well, doesn't matter. It's a story that'll outlast a cigarette."

"Have another, then."

He laughs, stubbing it out on his sole and pocketing the butt. "I should get going, vralen. But let me walk you home, if you don't mind."

"I don't—but it'll be a short walk. I live here."

He frowns, looking her up and down, as if searching for a uniform under her beaded dress, something that will explain her

relationship to the Grand Marshal. “Are you his daughter or something?”

“Hardly,” she sighs. “Just his perfumer.”

“I see.” Refreshingly, there is no pity in his voice, no disgust, but when he turns toward the stairs, she’s sure she’s said something wrong.

“Where are you staying?” she calls after him. “Conundrum Street? The boardinghouse on Petunia? So I can have your handkerchief delivered.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll run into you again, vralen. I know where to find you. Until then, my regards to the Marshal.”

“Wait—” She puts out her cigarette on the balustrade and trots down the staircase after him. When she reaches the bottom, she is alone but for her own image, flattened in the reflecting pool. She surveys the empty foyer, wheezing, as something flutters inside her purse. She does not notice the spindly creature of mucus that writhes from between the silver clasps, falls to the ground, and dies at her feet.

THE BIRTH OF THE DEATHBED

Every night, while Dawn sits at their iron mushroom of a table and shells grease-beetle for tomorrow's lunch, Guy regales Tyro with a performance. He sings of Tiliard's legends and histories, from its mysterious rooting in antiquity to its hundreds of branched and bizarre futures. He recounts the comedies that gave the streets their names, the classic romances of the great impresario Albrecht Vaughn, the drab Neo-Repressionist monodramas. Half of them are true and half false, but he doesn't know which half is which. It doesn't matter. Historicity, like everything in Tiliard, depends on what's playing at the Opera that season.

The tome in which he keeps his stories is the ninety-ninth edition of *The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species.* Buried between the lines in the entry on the six-legged hellrat, whose flinty claws are known to start alchemical fires, burns the legend of *Faustech.* In the margins of the chimera millipede lies the bittersweet tragedy of *The Lovers of Old Viennt.* Under the picture of Catoptric mimicweed, known for uprooting itself and stalking its victims from house to house, creeps *The Bast Street Butcher.*

Tyro knows that Guy is not reading the *Manual.* She suspects (and is entirely correct) that he is reciting, from memory, the performances he's seen from his time as an usher. She doesn't know that as soon as the curtains rise, the children are blindfolded and deafened with padded strips of silk, forced to guide latecomers to their boxes by touch alone. She also doesn't know that these precautions, intended to protect the city's priceless works from unfit and unpaying viewers, did not stop Guy. If he had to sweep away the rose petals and broken champagne glasses, mend the velvet seats and clean the whips and lingerie used in the gentleman's playlets, he could at least witness them in action. A boy can only scrub so much blood from the set of *The Price of Beauty* before he starts to wonder what he's missing.

Guy, though not known as Guy back then, was a good usher and a better thief. He learned every schedule, every seat, every creaky hinge and trapdoor, the winding catwalks and the hollow caverns under the stage the crew affectionately referred to as hell. He learned which businessmen liked what wines, who sponsored which ingénue and who might leave a cigarette burn on a careless attendant. He learned to gracefully accept pinches to his cheeks, and to distinguish the fumbling of a tipsy matron from the fondles of a lech. He knew where everyone sat and, more importantly, where they didn't, which allowed him to climb above the balcony unnoticed and devour every production.

He absorbed *Don Javenech* and Vrenecker's "Phantasm Suite" and *What God Forgot* in staggered chunks of stolen time, building piecemeal the city's glorious canon whenever he could elude the head usher. He witnessed overtures from their ends backward, finales from their beginnings forward, plots from their middles outward. He saw symphonies, ballets, burlesques, classics and avant-garde, sleeper hits and total flops, dress rehearsals and matinées. He replayed every performance in his dreams, humming tunes and muttering soliloquies as he drifted off under the coatrack. He reconstructed melodies on the backstage piano, and when prima ballerinas were auctioned at the end of the season or rented to a gentleman for the night, he donned their discarded corsages and retraced their choreography. He remained uncaught for nearly three years, until he was overheard weeping for the loveliness of the titular contralto's lament in *Larbella.*

To this day Guy is not allowed within a hundred paces of the theater, but he can still sing every note of the solo that got him fired. He'll sometimes use it to ease Tyro to sleep, or, on those nights when Dawn's dreams drag him back to the ambush of Broken Horse, he'll hum it in his ear. By the second verse, Dawn's eyelids will flicker, and Guy will know by the deepening of his breath and the twitch of his lips that his nightmare has allowed him, finally, to die.

* * *

When Guy returns from the Root of Abrupt Ends, his head is full of white-hot sound. A high drone throbs through his ear canal, then resonates in the dome of his skull. The hours are dizzy with fever. He is hosed down, then moans through a rag in his mouth while Dawn, plying a technique he'd learned from a battle medic in Ostlerfell, applies a stapler from Three's workshop to his ear. He doesn't vomit, he's fairly sure, nor does he shit himself, as Three declared he would. He cradles a cup of tea infused with belladonna and achewort, hypnotized by the way its ripples presage and echo the passing trains. When he crawls into the sleeping nook, Tyro on one side and Dawn on the other, he passes out before he can even try to pull open the *Manual.*

He expires around two. He's sure of it. Right as the last train rattles overhead, his soul exits his body—or something does. The ring in his ear deforms into a mimicry of music, warping his usual dreams, tangling the stage with proliferating vines of

counterpoint. It grows swiftly through him, first along his ear, then down his throat, tightening around his lungs. Helpless, he gropes for the bodies beside him, curls his toes, and a half-formed plea emerges from his throat, a shuddering, ectoplasmic moan. Swollen with song, he expels the sickly noise as one might suck and spit venom from a wound.

To his surprise, he wakes up alive. Shivering with dried sweat, unable to dispel the feeling that something strange has spilled from him, he examines his pillow for blood, then his underclothes for ejaculate. He finds nothing; no fluid soaking his bandage, no fever, not even that bitter taste that usually accompanies BSPAF exposure. Aside from a fluttering echo of pain in his ear, he feels fine—better than fine. He feels sharply, startlingly *existent.*

It's Dawn who's had the poorest sleep. Eyes sunken and ringed, he looks Guy over once and once again, then, satisfied with his bunkmate's health, dissolves into a cloak of coffee steam. He says little, as usual, but Guy recognizes the slope of his shoulders, the wrinkle at the edge of his frown. It is not often Guy sees him so worried, so it's not often he sees him so relieved.

Guy removes his bandages and leans into his mirror, razor in hand. His ear is a bit red, and a bit sore; a grayish scab bisects his cartilage, punctuated with tiny clips. It looks less like a wound and more like a trick of the eye, benign as a strip of plaster fastening cracks in a statue. Swelling, the *Borisch Manual* assures, is common in many venomous stings, but Guy's injury doesn't feel swollen so much as full—a taut, painless fullness, as after a meal. A shiver runs down his spine when he imagines something growing inside it.

He resolves not to think about it. What can't be confronted is best ignored, his father told him, a maxim used mostly in reference to his mother, and mostly on the nights drink put her in an ill mood. Hers had been a hungry fury, always in need of fuel. Inertness would send her flickering out the door like a flame starved.

Guy combs his hair over his ear and lathers his soap. He spreads it along his jaw and upper lip, then pauses to let a gust of factory smoke rumble through the ceiling pipes. When the apartment stills, he tilts the mirror to reveal Tyro at his elbow.

"You're up early," he says.

She sways in thoughtful silence. He hopes she'll ask how he is feeling, embrace him, or burst into tears of relief, like she used to when he'd return late from a job. At the very least, she'll ask him to regale her with his story, to paint a vivid picture of the dragon, even if, in the end, it's only a millipede.

"You sang last night," she says. "In your sleep. Something new."

He lowers the razor, curious.

"It was … really bad."

Little bastard. "Was it?"

"You just moaned. For *hours.*"

He turns back to the basin. "You didn't think I was gonna die quietly, did you?"

"You could've tried."

"Don't be a shit, Ty."

She breaks into a gap-toothed smile, a little goblin's grimace equal parts infuriating and compelling. "Show me how to shave," she says.

"I showed you last week," Guy replies.

At eleven, Tyro is an avid apprentice in every matter that should not concern her. She'll never need skill with a straight razor, even if, God forbid, she takes up the respirator. Still, she's enamored with the ritual. She has always loved the rhythmic stropping, the popping of the soap tin, and, necessary as all the rest, humming the waltz from *The Last Poet-King.*

"Don't tempt fate, grub," Dawn advises from the table. His years in the Palas Infantry have perfected his own shave; his face is smooth as apple skin by the time he leaves the mirror. "You'll only grow hair where you're not supposed to get it."

"Show me again," Tyro says.

Guy melts at her stare, the way her dark brows squeeze a dimple between them. "All right," he sighs. "Watch closely." He demonstrates how to prepare the soap, how to glide the razor across her chin, how to pause and move with the apartment's instability. "'Hold your blade steady, princeling,'" he sings. "'Hold it true, keen to cut the edge of the moon.'"

She hums in response, lips shut tight as the razor passes under her nose.

"You'll dull your blade," Dawn says. He reminds Guy, often and rightly, that Tyro is too old for this kind of indulgence. She's already too tall for her trousers and will need new shoes by month's end. She is, Guy can't help but notice, beginning to smell different. Deep in the folds of his gut, he knows time is short.

"There." He guides the razor over the foamy knob of her chin, protracting the last, gentle stroke. "The more you shave, the more it grows. By twenty you'll have a little mustache, like Three."

Dawn tosses them a towel. "And you'll love it just as much as she loves hers." He stands, too tall for the apartment, his lamplit shadow filling the space like liquid. He's volunteered to cover for his team this morning, claiming a one-man job from the company bulletin. His quarry is the kelpie lotus, a common blight on septic pools in the midcity. Not a lotus at all but a

carnivorous water bug, it attracts pets and unwary children with flutters of flightless, iridescent wings. One touch will result in a gush of gelatinous exudate, with which it adheres to its victim and sinks into the depths to feed. It's a passive predator and easy to remove, necessitating only a well-placed tarp and a fishing net, but out of all flavors of vermin, sticky is Dawn's least favorite.

Guy rubs the suds away and smacks Tyro's smooth cheek. "You wanna come to Three's today?" he asks. "Help me fix my helmet?"

"Only if I can have a cigarette," she says.

"Ty—"

"Just one. And you don't have to light it."

He rolls his eyes. He barely has a reluctant yes in his mouth before she pushes past him and out the door, witch's herbs nibbling at the end of her hair. She trots down the gangway, stopping only to greet the usual pack of neighborhood boys, half-dressed monkeys dangling in the jungle of catwalks beyond the guardrail. Guy's stomach always turns at their antics, though he and Dawn had been in their fearless place little more than a decade ago.

"That kid walks all over you," says his bunkmate flatly.

Despite himself, Guy smiles. "She's light on her feet, at least."

"She'll get heavier as she gets older."

"I've heard that's how growing works."

"She needs structure." Dawn slows where the branch to Three's workshop diverts from the main path. "Stability. You shouldn't let her run free all day."

"Then what should I do with her?"

"Find her work." Guy laughs, then bites his tongue when Dawn gives him a stern frown. "I'm serious. It's that time, Guy. It's just the right time."

* * *

Three is half as pleased to see Guy alive and well as she is to see that Tyro has come with him. She ushers them into her workshop with a wry smile, mussing the girl's hair as she passes.

"Hope you don't mind the extra company," Guy says.

"Ah, no skin off my teeth," Three replies. "How you feel?"

"Not bad."

"Get to work, then." She directs Guy to the furnace, where he pulls off his shirt and dons his iron mitts. Tyro feigns helpfulness by rearranging Three's collection of gears and wires. She sucks on the unlit cigarette, sleeves rolled up over smooth, unmarked forearms.

"*Atrocious,*" Three sighs, plucking out the congealed crust of BSPAF from the crannies of Guy's broken facepiece. "Criminal abuse of equipment."

Her own markings dance across her native arm as she works, attestations to her projects as an engineer for Wherewithal, Inc., foremost of which is the bank's miserly coin-counting apparatus, an invention so successful it would've secured her a life of pleasure and a penthouse in Hart Park, she claims, had a corporate coup not exiled her to the undercity.

"You're fortunate I'm not an honest woman, or I'd report this," she says. "Fucking tubes jangling everywhere. Gaps loose enough to let any bug crawl straight to your brain. No wonder you were seeing dragons—put your back into it, Moulène. I need heat."

"Maybe it wasn't a dragon," he says. "But I saw *something.* Tyro believes me."

"Grub, you believe anything this man tells you?"

She shrugs. "No."

"Yeah, you do, Ty."

"No, I *don't.*"

"Wise girl." Three waves her over. "C'mere for a minute. Stop scrambling my shelves and I'll show you how to weld a grenade casing."

"Whatever it was," Guy grunts, leaning over the bellows, "it wasn't in the *Manual.*"

"You better hope it was. What are we at now? Three ninety?"

"Three ninety-seven," Guy and Tyro say together.

"Well, pray you don't get credit for three ninety-eight. You know what happens to boys who add new species to the books. Here, grub. Go play with these." She plucks Tyro's cigarette from her mouth and replaces it with a stick of solder. "Remember Bacher's dragonfly—if they name something after you, it's because you've been eaten by it. You should know this, Guy.

Somehow you've got the whole damn *Manual* memorized and you still don't know this. Keep at that furnace."

"I don't want credit for three ninety-eight," he grunts.

"Don't lie to me. I see that glint in your eye." She lights the cigarette on the dome of the furnace. "Right, hot enough. *Enough.* Don't overdo it."

Guy steps down from the bellows, massaging his shoulder. Heat pounds along his wounded ear. "You think I'm crazy," he says.

"No, I *hope* you're crazy." She closes her wooden fist around a pellet of dried sap and thrusts it into the furnace. "Because if you're not, then we've got something the size of a streetcar crawling through the rhizosphere. And things like that—well, they don't get that big by *not* eating. Or worse, not being *fed,* if you catch what I'm putting down."

He shivers in the heat. "You reckon it's a Cult of the Mammoth Stag situation?"

"I don't reckon anything. I'm not paid to reckon. Here, put these over the vent." She rips his defunct tubing from his helmet. "Problem is, these big ones, once they get a taste of you"—she jangles her wooden arm at Tyro—"they come back for more."

"Don't start," Guy sighs. It doesn't take much to prompt Three to wax nostalgic about the beast that swallowed her from the elbow down. A couple of beers, or the presence of some doe-eyed boy. Sometimes the culprit is an albino alligator crawled from the river's depths, sometimes an ancient automaton awoken by a nefarious secret society, sometimes a vengeful middle manager from Wherewithal.

"Your real issue, Guy, is that you're not crazy." Three removes the resin-glass from the furnace and pulls it apart like toffee. "Not nearly crazy enough."

"Yeah, you say that on quarterly feedback."

"I mean it. Only way for an exterminator to retire sane is to enlist mad." She twirls the sap and folds it into a homemade, illicit mold in the shape of Borisch eyepiece lenses. "Done stripping those tubules?"

"Almost."

"Good. Big list this week. Bugbear moths on the next root over. And the lunar priest on Broken Teeth has those demon woodworms again, sowing doubt in his flock. We've even got an overcity job."

"Sreckt wouldn't take it?"

"Nah. The wedding planner on Fifth has lice again."

"*Those* lice?"

"Those."

Guy groans. The carousal louse is a common crasher of weddings, leaping unseen from bouquet to veil to marriage bed. Unions infested by the creature are short-lived and violently resentful, and one or both spouses aggressively try to seduce an exterminator the moment they arrive to decontaminate.

"I think it's the same goddamn nest." Three gives the mold one last shake and snaps it open. A piece of amber glass appears in her hand. "The subspecies that always gets the bride's father involved. Every time I think they're gone they pop up somewhere else. Like that line from that thing you like. The king of something."

"'Strike me from the front,'" Guy quotes, "'and like the bullet-star, I'll only rise at your back.'"

"Exactly that." Three places the glass into the frame of his helmet, then refits the tubes. "Boy's got a brain like a sponge."

"What does that mean?" Tyro asks.

"Means it's soft and full of holes and you can squeeze shit out of it. Here, Guy. Take your helmet. Don't you dare damage anything else. I don't wanna file any reports. We're *professionals,* not those plebeians you find at Sreckt Brothers." She opens a browned catalogue and jots a column of numbers. "One eighty for the tubules. Ninety-five for the glass, two twenty for the labor."

Guy laughs. The sum is obscene, and arbitrary. "I can get you a hundred by new moon," he says.

She looks him over. Unfailingly, she knows when he's lying; she's only uncertain when he tells the truth. It is his consistent dishonesty that forges a peculiar trust between them.

"Four ten," she says. "Regular Borisch channels, they'd charge you over seven hundred for a replacement."

"Two hundred."

"Three fifty and a favor. A really despicable one."

An equation tumbles in Guy's head: beer, smokes, housing maintenance fees, Tyro's ankles poking from trousers he's stitched and unhemmed and stitched again. What's another few handfuls of dirt, he thinks, when he's already a fathom deep? Not that he's ever lived on ground solid enough for burial. "All right," he sighs.

"Well, don't look so *upset* about it. You'll scrounge something up. Your day off is next week. You can ask for a donation from—" She glances to Tyro, still playing with the soldering torch, and lowers her voice. "Well—isn't there some god up there you're close with?"

THE ONLY GOOD MAN IN TILIARD

Every time death's scythe misses Grand Marshal Maximian Sorav, the Tender Guard executes a few of his enemies and throws him a parade. The ceremony arrives with the pomp and regularity of a holiday, commemorating a bullet sailing past his ear or a poisoned olive garnishing his martini. The trumpets blow the jaunty "March of the Third Autotomic Brigade" down Rue Petunia, and Sorav climbs atop his dappled horse to lead the tattoo, enduring every chord with a handsome, white-toothed cringe. Despite his ravenous taste for sopranos, the Marshal Revenant detests music.

In the solarium of the Palas, he steels himself for the pageantry. As he paces naked across the marble, he doesn't carry himself like a man exposed. He has a certain regal solidity that gets him mistaken, if standing still, for statues of himself. His skin is marked with decades of trials overcome, inked with honors his superiors gave him during his service and the scars they gave him during his rebellion. "Living proof," Aufhocker wrote of his longtime friend and once-commander, "that Beauty exacts a price."

Aster watches her patron over her perfumer's organ, a miniature cityscape of glass facets and stoppered chimneys. Prisms of scent capture the light spilling through the stained glass windows and tangles of flamewort vines, unspooling in strings of indigo and green and red. The topography of the organ defies mapping, a maze of decanters, atomizers, carrier oils, precipitants, herbs and aldehydes and the blended seduction glands of the northern bilge goat. Her notebook opens to columns of alchemical logograms: formulae to brighten the skin, refine the accent, inspire frenzied loyalty, or make a man, if only for a few hours, completely forget his past.

"Something with *voice,*" Sorav says. "Something for eloquence. The bastard is forcing me to make a speech."

"Who is, Eir Marshal?" Aster asks, uncorking her essence of songbird. He won't need a full coat. Just a dot behind his ear, or under the foreskin if he anticipates ending the day by conspiring with some parliamentarian's wife.

"Chancellor Gorslung. Who else? The man tells us to kiss his ass and God help us, all we can do is ask which cheek." The Marshal turns on his heel, muscles tensing in his leg. "Let's keep it short."

Aster scoops a thimble of liver tree ash. "Prosaic or poetic?"

"I don't care."

"Sincere?"

"Definitely not. Nothing gets those frock-coated pigs squealing more than sincerity."

"And for Florian?"

"You know him. He's adamant that he has a mustache."

Aster sighs. The Marshal's protégé always demands a scent suffused with strong angles of maturity. Something for marksmanship, and horsemanship, something to add a few inches to all the right places—and, as often as not, facial hair. She's a good perfumer, but nothing short of a miracle can address the fuzz that attempts to grow on Florian's upper lip.

"Give him something to clear his head," says the Marshal. "Something to cool him off. He's been impulsive lately. More than usual. Slit that gunman's tongue before we got anything out of him."

"You think he had a story worth listening to?" Aster asks.

"*Worth* is a strong word. The man was an insect, trying to talk himself up. Said there was something big moving under our feet. He didn't get farther than that before Florian got … overexcited."

Aster opens a jar of powdered blackberry thorns, then a tonic of blast mouse fungus. Finally, she reaches for the catalyst that ties the assemblage together, that makes a bouquet out of scattered petals. Cautiously, she opens the mirrored box at the center of the organ and retrieves the dropper. Even metabolized with a cascade of BGS enzymes, a single drop of ecdytoxin is enough to elevate a scent to a strong impression, and a second is enough to elevate a strong impression to a fatal miasma. A third might elevate one's workshop twenty feet in every direction and suspend the pieces there for an hour or two.

"Still," the Marshal continues, pausing to let her dab his lower lip, where his stubble begins, gold with the barest hints of white. "The thing about insects is that there's always more than one. I've been in this business long enough to know that much. He'll have friends nearby. Maybe even a patron."

"You don't think the Chancellor is involved?"

"Hm. Not his style. He's theatrical. This was … too straightforward. Almost spontaneous. I suppose I can't put anything past Crypsis, though."

Aster shudders at the invocation of the Chancellor's private intelligencers. "Here, Eir Patron. For your tongue." She presents him with the bottle, removing the stopper to let the vapor drift into his nostrils. His eyes twitch under closed lids. He can't breathe the essences as she can, he can't sense them percolating from lungs to blood, where they contort millions of minuscule aspects of both wearer and observer. While she can see every convoluted root, all he can do is smell the flower.

"This is new," he says eventually.

"I've been playing with citrus elements. Let it sit awhile, Eir Sorav. I think you'll like it."

He opens his mouth so she can place a drop on his tongue. Then she sets to work on the rest of him, dressing him in his usual regalia. On his breastbone she adorns him with strength, dexterity for his wrists, authority for his jaw. There is no need for a veneer of invulnerability. Somehow he has managed to secure that on his own.

She applies each scent with a horologist's precision, accounting for his natural smells, the shapes of his movements, the evolution and intermingling of each facet. Like music, or gardening, hers is not a static art; she considers the bloom and wilt of every note, so that by the time the Marshal Revenant steps in front of the crowd, he will embody every virtue the task at hand requires.

The door to the solarium opens. The laundress arrives with his uniform, the jeweler with his medals, and the mortician with the skull of the last man who tried to kill him. Bleached, deconstructed, and brushed with gold leaf, the bones have been fashioned into a tasteful headpiece.

"Before I forget," he says as the mortician tightens his tooth-studded bolo tie. "I want a dancer. Classically trained. Premier soloist, male or female. Ideally by Acid Moon."

Aster blinks. "New Acid Moon?"

"Quarter at latest. Is there a problem?"

"N-no, Eir Patron."

"Good." Sorav knows, but does not care, that the task of procuring musical talent should fall to an in-house composer. He hasn't bothered to sponsor one since the Revival. Barely a week after he seized the Palas and all its occupants he'd grown so annoyed with the bandleader's endless rendition of Tasarte's "Strangleroot Tarantella" he'd had the man nailed into his piano and thrown into the Catoptric.

"I'll try my best," Aster says.

"No, you won't try." He glances at her as the jeweler clips diamonds to his collar. "You will procure me a dancer by new moon. Understood?"

"Yes, Eir Patron."

"When does the fitting begin?"

"An hour ago."

"I shouldn't delay you, then." He hangs his pistol at his side. "God forbid you keep the Chancellor's bride waiting."

"No hurry. Elspeth won't be there for some time." Aster dips her hand in her breast pocket for her watch and finds Mallory's handkerchief instead. "If at all."

"Don't be too long. I'll need you tonight. I've got supper with the Chancellor and I'll need something to counteract him." He steps into his boots and makes for the arched door. The laundress throws on his cloak as he passes. "Remember, Acid Moon."

"Yes, Eir Patron."

"And Aster." He stops to glance over his shoulder, and his olfactory ensemble blossoms. His smile is young, vital, his stare piercing and assured. When he speaks, his voice arrives seamlessly in her head, as if he is articulating her thoughts before she has a chance to think them. She is not sure if these are his actual words, or only the ones she wants to hear: "This is the best scent you've made in years."

★ ★ ★

Aster is monstrously late, but not late enough to upstage Elspeth, who arrives half an hour after her entourage and a full hour after her appointment has ended. The seamsters and planners are minimally inconvenienced. Like every artisan in the overcity, their days contort around the nonlinear schedules of their clients. They circle the suite with food and champagne as Elspeth tries on dresses with earnest disgust.

"*Uncouth,*" she says, tilting her hips so a milky wave of silk glitters down her leg. "I might as well go naked. Aster, do you see this thing?"

"It's not great," Aster says. Bridesmaids scurry back and forth, fetching mirrors and adjusting the lighting. They exude a harmless bouquet of scents, each catered to a small insecurity: elevating a brow, straightening a smile. Their perfume is cheap, made not from ecdytoxin but some illusory knockoff, chimera toxin or wizard hazel.

Elspeth turns once more, then announces her verdict. "I wouldn't bury my worst enemy in this."

"My apologies, vralen," replies a seamstress. "We'll try another."

"I'm *devastated* I missed you at the courthouse," Elspeth says, stepping down from the dais. She's wearing a strong perfume today, muskrat blood with top notes of clove and contrition. It's as close to an apology as Aster's going to get. "But you'll never guess who I ran over on the way there."

"Ran into?"

"No, *over,* dear. It was that country boy. The one who's been hanging around the Argland Theater. He's a couturier or something. Mallory…"

Aster's heart hops. "Vant Passand?"

"That's the one."

"You—really, you shouldn't drive with your condition, El."

"And you shouldn't smoke with yours, but here we are. Besides, I barely nudged him. It was that intersection on Bast, by the butcher shop, where everyone hits everyone. Oh, thank you." Elspeth takes a wheel of sugared cucumber from a seamstress's plate. She eats as a crab pinches: thinly, with her lips pulled back to not compromise her gloss. Today it is emerald, like her hair. "Anyway, he was so good-natured about it. And a beautiful catch, once you get a good look at him. So we get to talking, one thing leads to another, and before I know it I'm taking him to *The Lilies Wretched* next week."

"*Lilies* is next week?"

"Closing night, dear. You should come. Ludovico will meet his match this season. According to Mallory, at least." She bends to peel off her gown. "I'd expect you to know all the production schedules, what with your patron's habits."

Aster holds back a smile. The moon has turned in her favor: a bounty of excellent dancers to bid on, and with plenty of time before Acid Moon. "I might come," she says.

"You'd better. I'll be so bored otherwise—I'm just so *tired* of all these Aufhocker productions. Besides, I need you to meet this man."

Aster knows this is her opening, her chance to execute her small revenge. She knows she should spill the details of her public fit, of being gifted a gentleman's handkerchief, and laugh at the coincidence that it had come from the same handsome stranger Elspeth had nearly killed earlier that day. She should start her story not with a man dying, but failing to.

Elspeth has already moved on, struggling into her next gown with a frustrated sigh.

"How does that one feel, vralen?" a seamstress asks.

"Better." Elspeth turns, rattling a skirt woven with lacy eggshells. "Very pretty. But it's too … expected. Don't you think so? Like a waiter bringing just what you ordered."

"It seems fine to me," Aster says.

"No, no—help me out of this. This won't look good onstage." She shimmies out of the eggshells, groping for Aster's free hand. As always, her heart inverts at the cold touch of the sapphires and rubies embedded in Elspeth's wrists, each a testament to her skill with a brush. Brightest of all are the engagement diamonds drilled into her thumb. It's been three turns of the moon since they've healed, but Aster still can't quite look at them.

The day those jewels were set marked a day of mourning among Tiliard's bachelors. An epidemic of tears swept through every quarter of the city, even from the private chambers of the Palas's heir. Seventeen and naïve enough to hope to win the affections of a woman five years his senior, Florian still tries to catch any hairpins she condescends to toss his way, desperate for a visit in his dreams. He's quick, a prodigy with a saber, but Elspeth is far better at sabotaging a throw than he is at responding to it.

While Florian had fallen for Elspeth in the manner of most powerless men, hopelessly and from afar, the Laurel Chancellor had fallen for her in the manner of the most powerful: sitting perfectly still, sweating under her studio lights like a roach in the sun. By that time, she already had a long line of subjects and suitors, tycoons and high priests who paid her in apartments and surgeries and cars, even as she handed over work that from any other painter would be considered unfinished. It was her masterful dedication to incompletion, to infinite potential, that brought her to the Laurel Chancellor's attention. Only she could capture the green light in his eyes, the blinding constellations of his jewels, the majesty of his ivy crown. And he could not stand to think that her brush would immortalize anyone else.

"Aster?" Elspeth paws through rows of silk and lace. "Are you there? Come help me pick. I can't even *look* at half this trash."

"I'm here."

"I hate white," Elspeth says. "It *screams* ingénue. Don't you think green would be better? Oh, God." She gestures to a hanging strip of silk. "What dreck. Do you see this? You must."

"Perhaps something from the back, vralen?" asks one of the girls, whose name Aster can't recall but who is recognizable by the bizarre geometry of her bangs. "If you can't find anything."

"The *back*!" Elspeth laughs. "Yes, perfect—a custom gown is too pedestrian. Get me something old, something really

dusty."

The girl hesitates.

"Well, *go.*" She scurries away, and Elspeth collapses onto the marble dais. "God, why is this so difficult? If I wanted to put hard work into anything I wouldn't be marrying a rich man." She plucks a stiff bridal cap from a nearby mannequin and fans herself with it, unaware of the ugly punctations carousal lice have left in the felt. "I'm not an ambitious girl, Aster. I don't ask much. All I want is to be gainfully unemployed."

"There are better men," Aster says for the hundredth time. *But none so gainful,* she doesn't add.

"Please. You think I haven't heard that before? What's the line? 'There's only one good man in Tiliard and he's my dad.'"

"I think it goes that he's my brother."

"Whatever. There's only one good man and he's my dog. Can we drop it? Oh, *yes,* this is it. This is my green."

The girl returns with a folded gown in hand. It's all ruffles and snail shells, a design that resembles a frilly moss more than an article of clothing. Aster is unsure how Elspeth can process the sight of it, how she doesn't see only a pair of pretty white arms presenting nothing but air.

"It's *wonderful,*" Elspeth says.

A hot, sinking feeling curls behind Aster's sternum. She turns away, covers her mouth and hunches over, slipping Mallory's handkerchief from her pocket.

"Is she all right?" asks the bridesmaid.

"She's fine," Elspeth says, laying a gentle hand on Aster's back. She always softens her edge when it comes to their condition, though her manifestation is much easier to hide. One has to look deep into her eyes, often with the aid of a fundoscope, to see the toxic deposits that proliferate across her retinas, blinding her to everything but beauty.

"Really, my dear," Elspeth says. "You must see someone about this. Go to the Surgeon General."

"Rather just—die," Aster wheezes.

"Well, you ought to see *someone.* I've got a few qualified friends. You know I did the promotional portrait for what's his name—that baritone with the scar. Played Dr. Gortt in *What God Forgot,* so he ought to know a thing about medicine."

Aster doesn't remind her he also played Sigmund the Torturer in *The Price of Beauty.* "He won't—"

"Oh, he *will* see you. Once I'm Laurel Dame, I can have him exiled if he doesn't. Don't give me that *look.* What's the position for if not to be abused?"

Something stickier than a laugh travels up Aster's throat. "Excuse me," she rasps, stumbling out the door and into the street.

When she is sure she's out of sight of the dressmaker's, she lets her fit overtake her. A familiar heat expands behind her sternum, crawling along her ribs, up her trachea. It grows up her throat, crowding out her breath. Choking, she stumbles into the alley and sinks to a pained squat. Hot fluid fills her mouth, and with the dizzied panic of an air-starved brain, she brings Mallory's handkerchief to her lips.

Her breath cools a little. As she gulps the threads of his scent, her throat loosens, relaxes, and a whistle of air passes between the walls of her windpipe and the mass blocking it. She closes her eyes, heaves one last cough, and spits into the handkerchief. Between the dark streaks of mucus lies a clump of soft, undulating tissue, branched like her airways. Bodiless but alive, it flutters its cilia, toxic nodules shimmering along its length like faceted eyes.

It is, the Surgeon General would say, a work of art.

Aster watches the tissue curl between Mallory's initials, then dumps it in a sewer grate. Before she folds the handkerchief again, she takes a moment to examine his defiled embroidery. Fantastical and haphazard, the stitching seems more intuition than intention. It's refreshing, compared to the florid extravagance of Revivalist needlepoint.

It's a long-standing tradition for young men to record their journeys in fancywork, and there is every part of the Catoptric River Valley sewn into the batiste. Around the edge, diagonal stitches mark the razor peaks of the Sawteeth, capped with toxic fumes. In the center lies Tiliard, the heart of the living world, a giant's garden blooming in iridescent crewel. Here is the prison-castle of Mongfestun with its black towers, there is a flying horse sewn in Ostlerfell Blue. Liquid silver runs down the center of the vale, a long dragon of a river sprouting eight legs and a pair of slender wings. A tiny figure rides its tail—Saint Guylag, she guesses, with his green banner. Mallory is evidently a well-traveled man, at least through Aufhocker's body of work.

She wipes her mouth on the south end of the river valley and straightens. The circle of Fifth is relatively quiet this evening, empty but for a gaggle of university students kneeling between streetcar lanes. They're from the department of dendrochronology, judging by the drills and corers they lay over the street, sampling the city's rings for excerpts of its history. As they uncork a thigh-sized plug of the intersection, a trolley screams by, shaving a few threads from their ruffled coats. They are indifferent to the danger. They know a good student is more easily replaced than a good sample.

Aster is abruptly struck by how strange the ground of Mallory's hometown must be, cold and solid and unmoving. She shudders to imagine a life on the fringes of the dead world, without the swarming purr of the city, the limitless human and

nonhuman bodies devouring, growing, joining and dividing, an infestation that spreads from the grand maples of Hart Park to the toxic depths where even the bravest exterminators never tread.

A few blocks down, a roar rises from the Rue Petunia (a celebratory riot, Aster will learn from the next day's *Arbuscle,* as the Marshal Revenant concludes the most moving speech he has ever given). She turns back to the dressmaker's, folds the handkerchief into her pocket, and suddenly, the line from that old Porrain comedy returns to her.

"There's only one good man in Tiliard," she mutters, "and he's been dead for years."

A HOUSE CALL

The Parish of the Last Monday holds its services in the cathedral on the corner of Thirteenth and Rebirth. Every twenty-eight days, the bishop conducts the vespers, ushering in the quiet glory of the new moon with a tide of choirboys' voices. It is a night of cleansing. The Palas pardons a chosen prisoner, the parish is absolved of its old sins, and Guy Moulène commits a slew of new ones.

He begins by sneaking into the overcity. Hair combed, collar straightened, a shining Borisch sidearm on his hip, he steals through the sweltering steam of the midcity jungles, treading an old smuggling route from his days as an errander, hopping lifts and scrambling up abandoned guard shafts until he emerges onto a peripheral boulevard. A parade thumps somewhere in the distance, drumbeats rippling through the constellations of city lights in the puddles. Guy's path is clear but for wadded newspaper and broken bottles—and a wandering trio of Palas guardsmen, who question him briefly before sending him on his way. He is wearing his overcity uniform tonight, and the Guardsmen's pleasure of an arrest won't outweigh the backlash from whatever manor is missing their exterminator. Tiliard butlers are not known for their clemency.

Guy turns a corner, and the cathedral declares itself in a rush of light and music. Every stained window is aglow, a kaleidoscope of martyrs cushioned in blossoms of datura and human blood. It is, according to Tiliard's Tourism Bureau, the thirty-first-grandest sight in the city, but Guy doesn't linger to appreciate it. Instead, he glances over his shoulder and vaults a wrought iron fence.

The bishop's house sits in the church garden, so decorous among the rhododendrons they seem to have been cultivated from the same seed. Guy creeps under statues of martyrs, through the shrubbery, and onto the rectory porch. The footman has been dismissed for the night, so he enters a side door into the scullery. He gropes through the pantry, following the smell of roast pheasant and the soft strum of a harpsichord.

In the golden foyer, one hand occupied with a glass of wine and the other with the melody of the "Hunter's Cantata in E-half," is the bishop's wife. She jumps when Guy clears his throat, smile pulling at her lips.

"Oh, you made it," she says. She stands, smooths out her gown, and takes his arm. "Let's get started—we have *such* a dreadful infestation of silverfish, and it's getting worse by the minute. Little uglies are moving in from the garden. I can hear them in the dining hall."

She leads him to a room arched in oak, chandeliers multiplied by the mirrored walls. A table strains under an extravagant meal, at least a dozen courses crowded around a peacock-feathered centerpiece. At her command, Guy sits at its head.

"I swear," she says, lifting a bottle of Weingut Marseea sweet red, "we've tried everything under the moon to get rid of them. Everything short of fire."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Vra Bishop."

"They must have come all the way up from the roots. They're not *normal*—the things are the size of my fists. Last week one tried to crawl up the pant leg of a dinner guest."

"Really?" Guy asks, suppressing a smile.

"Ever since they showed up, everything tastes *off,*" she says. "The silver has tarnished, and they're souring the wine. Here, see?"

Guy sips obediently when she lifts the glass to his lips.

"They're invading my recipes, changing them around. I'm afraid to cook. I can't even *eat*—not alone, not without someone to protect me."

"I'd be happy to assist—" Guy starts, and does not finish, as the bishop's wife has placed a dumpling in his mouth.

"Would you?" she asks. Her finger eases the pastry back and forth on his tongue. "That would be *grand.*"

She pinches the dough, and filling spills into his mouth, flavor masked by the pungency of her nail lacquer.

"I had hoped you would arrive earlier, Eir Bug-Killer," she says. "You really should have been here by the psalms. Is it acceptable now for the brave men of Borisch to dawdle on the clock? Maybe I should call Sreckt Brothers next time."

"No, Vra—" he says, shaping his words around two of her fingers, then, choking, three.

"Oh my," she breathes. She withdraws her hand and wipes it on his starched collar. "What happened to your ear?"

"Nothing," he says. "Nothing fatal." He glances at himself in a nearby carving knife, but the wound seems unchanged, apart from a few dimples where the staples had been removed.

"It's rugged," she says, perching on the arm of his chair. She takes his hand and places it on her waist, then plucks a chocolate cordial from a nearby pyramid of confectionery. She pops it into her mouth, sinks onto his lap, and wraps her arms around his neck. When she opens her lips over his, flavors flood his mouth—first chocolate, then sweet rum, then a minty tongue.

He gathers her in his arms and lifts her from his lap. Lips locked on hers, slick with filling, he places her on the table, directly atop the gazpacho. She squeals and falls back, pulling him after her. Rattling the cutlery, groping for purchase on the roast duck, he kisses her, leaving a trail of melted chocolate from her neck to her bodice.

"Hurry," she says. She rustles open her skirts with a puff of Fauniche perfume, a delicate, floral scent that perfectly complements the wine lingering on his tongue. (The bishop's wife, it's known across the overcity, is an excellent sommelier.) She clutches his hair and pushes his face into her petticoats, where, diligent as a bee, he burrows through petals of lace and silk.

"*Hurry,*" she says again, knocking the knob of her pubic bone against his nose. His eyes fill with tears, but he soldiers on, reminded of a production of *The Last Poet-King* he'd seen as a boy, during which the leading man had been kicked sidelong by a coryphée and sang proudly through it, blood running down his cravat.

"Hurry, before my husband … oh, my husband…"

Guy still recalls the exact verse. *A tyrant conquers with his sword, a king with his tongue,* sings the titular hero through his bloody nose, whereupon he proceeds to conquer his rival, the haughty queen of a neighboring province. The bawdy joke, like many others, had been lost on him as a child.

"More—"

He employs his fingers and thinks deeply about what line comes next. A short recitative before an aria. No, a duet. The Poet-King enters the queen's chambers, sword unsheathed and curved upright (another joke that had passed over his head). His ear rings trying to conjure the song, his tongue stumbles as he mimics the lines against slick skin.

"*Oh,*" the bishop's wife gasps, knees trembling at his shoulders.

Now that he thinks on it, that had been the night some enterprising stagehand had sewn luminescent threads into the queen's gown, bluer than Beetle Moon. A touch of Ostlerfell dye. A rare, expensive color, at least before the War.

"Hurry, oh, *hurry.*" She stiffens, the little roll of her stomach bulging under her dress. "My husband—"

The music rises, full, grand, remarkable in both its perfection and its perfect clarity. Guy almost gasps with the intensity of it, more alive in his mind than it has ever been—he remembers every note, every word, the shapes in the counterpoint and the shifts in timbre. A cadence swells between his ears, drowning out the clatter of cutlery, the moans of an approaching orgasm, the squeak of the door opening.

The bishop's wife bucks, knocking the charcuterie board from the table. Her legs flex, locking Guy under her canopy of underskirts. He is too engrossed to see the shaft of light spill in from the hallway, or the olives roll past the sideboard, wobbling to a stop at the golden hem of a cassock.

A shout rips through the room—the bishop's wife stills, then shrieks. Guy has no time to extricate himself before a hand grabs his shoulder, flinging him from the table.

He stumbles and swings his arm, knocking against the bishop like rubber on marble. The man is improbably built, shoulders too broad for his bookish tippet, muscular neck bulging over his collar, enraged scowl parting the flowers woven into his beard. When he tosses Guy to the ground, it is in a graceful cascade of silk and pearls.

His wife scrambles to the edge of the table. Wine spills, plums tumble from golden bowls, and Guy hits the tiles in a streak of gravy. He gropes for an escape, but the bishop slams a knee into his shoulder. One hand wraps around his windpipe, and the other draws back. The blow comes swiftly, snapping against his ear in a shock of white-hot pain.

He goes blind. The bishop disappears, all except his thick fingers, the metal of his rings, his crushing weight. Guy's ear throbs, and a wail echoes through the room—not the bishop's wife, but the final note in the duet, a high, sustained vibrato. It quavers, then rises, and Guy recognizes the shriek of giant, centipedal segments.

A sudden pressure unfolds in his skull, an expansive force pounding to get out. His heart stoppers his throat, fluttering in terror. He claws at the world around him, trying to wriggle away from the terrifying music, out of the bishop's grasp, the hunched, dreamlike form of a monster bending over him, but his arms are weak, his lungs empty. He can do nothing but raise a shaking finger and tap a beat on the man's wrist.

The pressure relents. The song fades, and Guy draws a breath. Blurry candlelight aligns to reveal the bishop's frown.

"What's wrong, my son?" he asks. "You usually struggle a great deal more than this."

Guy blinks. His heart slows, and the pain in his ear shrinks to a dull throb. "A … apologies, Father."

"Are you feeling ill?"

"It's just—" He searches for the creature in the periphery of his vision. "A palpable hit." The bishop makes to dismount him, and he feels his payment slip away like a bodkin through a suitor's grasp. He hooks a finger in the man's pearl collar. "It's

nothing. Please continue."

"Yes," says the bishop's wife. She dangles over the edge of the table, skirt hiked, one chocolate-smeared breast popping from her dress. "By all means, do continue."

The bishop sighs, then places his hands over Guy's neck and resumes the murder. Reinvigorated by the threat of leaving with empty pockets, Guy manages a livelier fight this time. He wrings his assailant's wrists, rolls his hips, and, somewhat to his surprise, manages to cough out a few insults of scathing veracity before he succumbs and falls limp.

He lies motionless on the glittering tiles, splayed like a celestial hero in an asterism of feta. When the bishop is sure his wife's despoiler will not rise again, he turns to her. She clambers over what remains of the smorgasbord, prostrating herself, kissing her husband's rings and vowing to never betray him again. The bishop, weeping with relief, confesses he worships her more than the moon itself. United in their faithlessness, they entangle, and the table's overtaxed bolts begin to squeak.

"I'll never lose faith again," she moans. "Oh, never, *never*—"

"That's right," comes the panting reply. "That's fucking right."

Guy plays his part, but cannot resist a slice of gruyère that lands next to his face. In the crude fury of their copulation, neither the bishop nor his wife notices the vanquished defiler rise briefly from the dead and slip a few items of charcuterie into his mouth.

★ ★ ★

When they are finished, they furnish Guy with a hundred marks and a good meal. The lady of the house carves what is left of the pheasant while her husband picks confit from Guy's hair.

"Apologies, my son," he says. "I didn't mean to strike you so hard."

"It's all right," Guy says. A plate slides toward him, a sloppy mélange of meat and sauces pounded together by hips and knees and elbows. It's the passion that goes into its creation, the bishop's wife insists, that makes it such a delicious blend.

"Same day next month?" the bishop asks, wiping Guy's neck with a steamed towelette.

"That's fine."

"Next time, something with a little less … sauce. A burglary, maybe."

"Whatever suits you, Father." The pleasant thickness of the pheasant on Guy's tongue is matched only by the banknotes in his pocket. "Truly."

"A witch hunt? An inquisition?"

"Something gentler, love," his wife replies. "We ran him a bit ragged tonight."

"It does look so," the bishop says. "And you're so thin. Be sure to take the croissants with you. They're hardly touched."

"Thank you, Eir Bishop." A couple bonbons have survived the onslaught, so Guy slips them into his pocket for Tyro. With a few extra marks at his disposal, he knows he should stop at a midnight market to find something to replace her trousers. A dress, maybe—blue, with green trim, elegant and unpretentious and nothing like the frilled, sequined things their mother used to make. He can already hear Dawn's wise rebuke: Tyro will outgrow a dress in six months and destroy it in three.

"Why don't you stay?" the bishop's wife asks. "At least the night. The Grand Marshal is on the streets throwing some sort of violent soirée, and I don't want you harassed on the way home."

"Isn't he always?" Guy sighs. "What's this one about?"

"Oh, I don't know. They're putting up a new statue of him or something."

"I have work in the morning. I'll be okay."

"Well, then." She hands him his sidearm. "Don't forget to clear up the garden a bit on your way out. I was serious about those silverfish."

★ ★ ★

The Root of Joyous Healing derives its name from its salutary bathhouse, a collection of a few dozen pitcher plants hanging from its underside. The flowers cluster over a stack of iron patios, heated by redirected factory exhaust. Barring the occasional snapped suspension vine or accidental boiling-alive, the bathhouse is famously restorative. Its waters wash away rashes and wounds, and its lovely view of the docks is capable, according to the health columnist at the *Rhizosphere,* of curing the most obstinate cases of gout. The bathhouse is also within view of a transparent fungal sac bulging from the Root of Treasures, which hosts the monthly meeting of Tiliard's Poverty Mitigation Society. They peer through spyglasses and sort through the bathers, judging employment histories and strength of character by the tattoos circling shoulders and wrists and necks. They scout for girls with arms long enough to pick dust from the textile machinery in the midcity, for boys to decorate the Laurel Chancellor's pleasure gardens, for women with sellable curls or strong-shouldered workmen. Occasionally the bishop's rivals will stake out the baths with brass ear horns, greedy for the hums of young bathers that could outcompete the choir of the Parish

of the Last Monday.

Today, their view is obscured by a band of local boys, who dangle from crosshatched metal beams and jeer at the bathers, one weak finger away from a fatal fall. They whistle as Guy peels off his tunic and slides down the rubber lip of a pitcher plant. Tyro rises to defend him, spitting insults at the ledge of the patio. Her obscenities don't disperse the boys, but Dawn's well-aimed pebbles do.

He stretches his broad shoulders at the edge of the pool, four lavender ribbons circling his right arm, a flawless work record his left. No debtors' marks, no contract violations, no crimes, no evidence of his dishonorable exile to the undercity; even the wounds he took in Ostlerfell have closed so well they're barely visible. When Dawn does not blind the voyeurs outright, he receives the brunt of their propositions: offers for labor or sex or a row on the betting stage. He accepts none.

"Move," Tyro says, squeezing past Guy. "I wanna see the boats."

"You can see them from the barracks just fine," he replies, but still sinks to his chin to let her pass, stretching his feet toward the curled taper of the pitcher's base, where its digestive enzymes work the fastest.

"Not from this angle." She likes to point out the gentlemen boarding the ivory liners bound for the fallow countryside, the behemoths of luxury like the old *Queensbullet* and the *Bastion Rose,* and remind Guy how he's promised to take her on one. He'd used the offer as leverage in some silly argument years ago, and he's given up on hoping she'll forget. Tyro never forgets. If his brain is a sponge, hers is a pair of snap-beetle pincers.

"You just want to holler at your friends in the moss up there," Dawn says, jutting his chin toward the regrouping boys. He reaches out a large hand, cups her curly head, turns her around, and pushes her across the pool. "Go get the soap for us. No lip. Go."

Guy shrugs the week's accumulated smells into the foaming acid. First goes the stink of factory exhaust, then the wastewater, cigarette smoke, pyrethrin and BSPAF, then the bishop's cologne. As he settles into a cushion of steam, he feels Dawn's gaze on the finger-width marks around his neck. His bunkmate never misses evidence of his supplemental income, the bruises and little bites and rope burns, but he also never says a thing.

Except today. With Tyro fetching sponges at the other end of the pitcher, he leans in and cuts Guy, sharply but not deeply, with three words. "You deserve better."

Blood rushes to his face, throbbing in his ear. He aches to accuse Dawn of envy that he can't come home with a week's wages in a day (and another week's wages' worth of chocolate truffles), but he knows the blow won't land. Guy suspects the man would sooner drown in the Catoptric than trust a rope thrown from a kid glove.

Guy cages his words behind gritted teeth as Tyro returns with the soap. Begrudgingly, she submits to her brother's touch, letting him rake through her hair and drop a halo of clods at her shoulders. "Where've you been, Ty?" he asks. "I've slogged through sewage cleaner than you."

"Around," she answers.

"Fighting again?"

She pouts and clams up. As he dips her under the white-foamed surface, a hand finds his shoulder. Roughly, silently, Dawn works out the final snarls in his hair, scrubbing away the spores and bitumen and strawberry preserves.

Guy doesn't notice the steam loosen the scab on his ear, already disrupted by the bishop's strike. He doesn't see the way Dawn narrows his eye at it, nor feel his fingers dab at the droplet of silver that swells at its edge. Oblivious, he sinks to the bottom of the pitcher to rinse, then makes his way out of the pool. Tyro follows, hauling herself onto the mesh patio and throwing her towel about her waist.

Dawn lingers, transfixed by the drop on his finger. Its surface is a mirror more perfect than the Catoptric. It magnifies every hair of his furrowed brow, every streak of ice in his stare, the fascinated dilation of his pupil.

He blinks, and sees the bead is only blood—the same that swelled when he and Guy slit their fingers on the razored spines of the pact-rose many years ago, when he had been a runaway from Orphanwell and Guy an errander lost on his latest route. He flinches at the memory of the pain—so keen, so joyful, it drowned out all others, erasing the ache of feet too big for his shoes, the welts from the housemaster's belt, the growl of his stomach. The terror and vagaries of boyhood melted away in that precious moment, making way for the sting of skin opening, the heat of his thumb pressing against Guy's, the pressure as they sucked away the blood, the beauty of Guy's laugh, of his singing. It was the first time Dawn asked Guy his name, and the first time Guy offered a false one.

The droplet ripples under the force of a train passing overhead, and the memory evaporates. Dawn is twenty-three again, submerged in a steaming pitcher plant with a streak of red running down his finger. In the years to come, he will attempt many times to forget this moment, to erase it through force of will and chemical compounds, but on those nights when he lies sleepless and alone in his bed, he will turn it over in his head, refitting details like a puzzle box. He will never understand the perverse force of yearning that brings his hand to his mouth.

He brushes the blood against his lips. He expects a familiar, metallic taste; he does not expect it to electrify his skin, sweet

as treacle. He has never tasted anything so lovely, so odd.

His tongue darts against his fingertip, then down his knuckle, then probes the webs between his fingers. He can't help it. He opens his mouth over his thumb, latching like an infant. He sucks at his palms, he scrapes his teeth under his nails. When one finger is licked clean, he moves onto the next, then the next—then, just in case, he lifts his opposite hand and tries that too.

When there is none left, Dawn feels inspired but helpless, as if he has just witnessed something of pure beauty and will never find the words to describe it.

WHAT MY HUSBAND DOESN'T KNOW

"That's it? That's all you got?" Three lifts her goggles to glare at Guy as if he has presented her with a rat's entrails rather than a stack of crisp banknotes. "Looks like that old preacher managed to fuck you twice."

"You gonna take it or not?" Guy asks. "I'll bring the rest by Martyr's Moon. Apartment maintenance fees were due."

"*Maintenance!*" She plucks the bills from his hand and counts them. "Sure, maintenance is due. And yet who do I spy in the mess hall but your little sister in brand-new clothes? Wearing the kind of blue you can only find up top."

Guy bites his cheek. Dawn eyes him from the corner of the workshop, cleaning rod in hand. A row of polished nozzles grows beside him.

"For being such a compulsive liar," she continues, "you're shockingly bad at it. Here, help me with this. I can't do this one-handed." Three replaces her goggles and returns to her work, laying her wooden arm across the table. She hands Guy a welding pen and a vial of sap, directing him over the loosened screws of her palm. Carefully, with gritted teeth, she peels back a fibrous tendon. "Grab the pliers and hold the flame steady."

"So I bought Tyro a dress," Guy murmurs, lifting the rubber annulus of her wrist. "You want her to run around the barracks naked? Dawn, before you start, I bought it two sizes too big."

"Face it, Guy," Three says. "It's past time she earned her keep. I'll have the Twelfth draw her up a contract."

"No." Instinct forces the word from his mouth, though he knows he has no pulpit from which to preach. He'd been younger when he proudly pressed his thumb to paper.

"Perfect time to start," Three says. "Just old enough to squeeze into the nastier tunnels, just young enough to not know better. Careful—that's my nerve you're about to bump."

"I said no."

"Then what else, my friend?" Dawn asks gently. "There are worse jobs for a kid her age."

"Cut her hair," Three suggests. "Ladies up top'd sell their souls for waves like hers."

"*No.*" Guy grips the pliers, knuckles whitening, until something snaps. Three's flexors hiss, and a tubule hemorrhages electric sap.

"*Fuck,* Guylag! Cool your goddamn horses." Behind her, in a knot in the wall, something thumps down the pneumatic tube. "Dawn, get that for me. I gotta clean up after this butcher. Guy, I swear to God, if you force me to call Nic I'm gonna wear your arm instead."

Dawn sets aside his carbine and pulls the capsule from the tube. "Captain," he says, "you'll want to look at this."

"Doubt that, Corporal." Her goggles stay fixed on her wrist. Carefully, she manages to reattach her ligament. "Look—*this* is how you do it. Look at how the trigger finger flexes."

"Captain," Dawn says again.

"Fine, fine. One second. Moulène, hold still." Stool squealing, she turns to take the paper in her free hand. She reads it once and once again, frowning. "It's eating *what,* now?" she mutters.

"What is it?" Guy asks.

"Hold still," she snaps, glancing over the message again. "Actually, drop that and close me up. We're taking the elevator. I said close up, Guy."

He kills his flame, and Three's arm creaks in the sudden cold. "What—"

"Overcity job." Swiftly, she helps Guy screw on her carpal plating. She stands, taps each of her fingertips, flexes her wrist. "Some bug's nesting in the pipes under Conundrum."

"What kind of bug?" Guy asks.

"They have no idea," Dawn says. He tosses Three her helmet, and the workshop fills with the din of belt-buckling and button-snapping.

"Might be your dragon, Guylag," Three says. "Whatever it is, if it's as big as it sounds, there'll be a bounteous tip rolling our way." She grins in that familiar way she does when she arranges large sums in her head. It's a smirk half savage, half generous—she is setting aside a few columns for her boys, whatever she can shield from the Borisch accountants. "Grab your bow tie, Eir Moulène. And don't break anything this time."

* * *

The Marshal Revenant, when in a kind mood, likes to remind Aster that she is too critical of herself. She is obligated, at least by contract, to agree. She is too critical of herself, and this is the least of her faults.

The others are too numerous to count and too broad to name, but like most things, they can be addressed with the right perfume. A hint of ecdytoxin can fix her drooping eyelid, close the gap between her front teeth, lend her an air of brooding mystery or apply a chemically formulated *je ne sais quoi*—or, if she feels daring, a frantic *sauve qui peut.*

Tonight she opts for something defensive. Bilge musk and plum, for her silk-clad wrists; for her dress of rattling beetle shells, the powder of goliath-crab claw, a steadfast scent that deters ill-intentioned men and wards off hangovers. She adds a spritz of flamewort to the ensemble, sending the lizard tails in her carcanet writhing with color. When she is finished, she is a work of living art, a masterpiece of aposematism.

"It'll do," she mutters.

She swallows six capsules of cough suppressant, tucks Mallory's handkerchief into her purse, and takes the trolley down Conundrum Street. She disembarks at the main square, pushing through the crowd of hucksters and tourists and the Revivalist statuary that sprouts from the cracks like weeds. Grand pillars branch up the Opera's façade, threaded with silver stripped from the weaponry of fallen performers. A banner hangs between them, announcing closing night. Another rapier will be welded into the collection by morning.

She arrives at the tail end of intermission, when the betting is just ramping up. The marquee is pinned with fist-sized fireflies: Ludovico Pelagos is reprising his role as Thomas the Elder, and across from him, under the Younger, a name is struck through in black ink. Sick, or dead, or in violation of his contract. Ludovico's antagonist will be an understudy tonight. The crowd is giddy about the tragedy. It's not often an ingénu's debut is also his swan song.

Aster flashes the Marshal's seal at the ticket office. When she pulls out an envelope, the impresario materializes like a spirit summoned, stepping from a column of pink cigar smoke to count the bills. He flips through twenty, thirty, forty thousand marks without a word. For a moment Aster fears it won't be enough to buy tonight's victor, but after counting twice, he slips them into his pocket. The Marshal will have his dancer.

"Acid Moon," Aster says. "Quarter at the latest."

The impresario nods, then disappears into the hidden veins of the playhouse. Finished with her task, Aster joins the crowd in the foyer. She accepts a coupe of dark liqueur from a passing usher boy and congratulates herself on her success. There is no way the Marshal, even with his exactitude, will find Ludovico lacking. The man has spent the better part of the last decade worshipped as a death god onstage. Something to which Maximian Sorav can easily relate.

The pluck of a harp closes the entr'acte, and the crowd files back into the theater. Aster tries to catch a glimpse of Elspeth in the bustle, scanning the highest galleries for her admirers, snapping flashbulbs, or a spurned fop trying to claw his way back into her good graces. She sorts through a slew of familiar faces: the Minister of Finance and his sycophants, the Seamstress Laureate in a gown of golden razors, the Secretary of Internal Reform smoking his usual cigar.

She doesn't see Elspeth, but, unsurprisingly, she does catch a glimpse of her groom-to-be. Where other despots might commandeer the printing presses or armories, Chancellor Gorslung prefers a vantage point close to the stage. While the heart of his city beats in thrums of bass strings, while its history is told and retold and its champions dedicate their victories in his name, he sits in his box and conducts the seedy Tiliard overworld. Money and contracts and alliances change hands, threats are made, betrayals committed, assassinations performed and swept away by diligent ushers.

Charming and accessible as ever, he moves through the chaos with the ease of a boy in his playground—just as he does when he hosts a gallery opening or his fêtes in the botanical gardens, when the flowers open in gorgeous dapples of the Revivalist party colors. He juggles tycoons and warlords, rejecting the affectation of gloves, one bare hand flitting from handshake to handshake, the other wrapped around the waist of a bejeweled contortionist. As usual, he eschews the laurel crown in favor of scented pomade, streaked through hair too thick and black for his age. Aster can smell him even from this distance. Each clap of his palm against another's gives off a rich, almost fungal scent. The Perfumer Laureate has equipped him for diplomacy tonight.

Aster sighs. If Elspeth is a no-show, she ought to catch the streetcar back to the Palas. The Revenant's scent-maker doesn't need to be seen drinking alone and aimlessly, especially in this nest of snakes. Sorav is already a little too paternal in his patronage; he disapproves of her late-night capers even more than he does Florian's, though her misadventures, unlike his, have never culminated in any public massacres (as far as she's aware).

Aster pushes against the crowd, but pauses when she spies a familiar face, half as pretty as Elspeth's but just as welcome.

Mallory stands at the edge of the mezzanine, leaning on the golden balustrade. He's hatless tonight, but sports a feather in his curls like the steel-knuckled tomboys of Splinter Row. He looks profoundly out of place, his embroidered suit a shade of lavender that barely skims the outskirts of taste. A group of gamblers has gathered on the stairs below him, a giggling collection of short skirts and long legs. Aster can't tell if their intent is to flatter or torment him, and by the look on his face, he can't

either.

His appearance stalls her just long enough for an usher to pry her empty glass from her hand and replace it. One more can't hurt. She takes a gulp, then a deep breath, and decides she's feeling chivalrous tonight. It would be poor form to abandon him now, to leave a helpless country boy to be beaten or fleeced.

She glides up the stairs to the mezzanine, preceded by a snake of perfume. The musk gently nudges the idlers out of her way; a hint of mayfly exudate renders their attention fleeting. The girls part for her, politely, unwittingly, and Mallory drips from their awareness like water through a sieve.

"Appreciated, vralen." He smiles—genuinely, as far as she can tell. "Those girls are on the prowl for a mark."

"You do look like one, Eir vant Passand."

He laughs, feather rippling in the glassy light. "That's fine. I aspire to always be smarter than I look."

She takes his arm. "Did no one tell you it's dangerous to go to a show alone?"

"I didn't come alone." He glances around as they ascend to the balcony. "But I may leave that way."

"Elspeth is known to abandon her dates," Aster says. "Don't take it personally."

He plucks a cocktail from a passing tray. "You're close with her, vralen?"

"We were … in the Sanitarium together."

"I see." There is no hint of surprise in his voice, no disgust. "She told me about her eyes. Why her paintings are so…"

Aster smiles, unsure if she should attempt to explain Elspeth's inexplicable method, the way her streaked oil continues to grow after her brush retreats, clinging to a viewer's eye well after they look away—an effect only strengthened by the portraits' incompletion. Their subjects will infect dreams, manifest in slips of the tongue or in absentminded napkin doodles. In the Chancellor's case, a good look at his likeness will have even his opponents parroting his rhetoric.

"Has she ever finished one?" Mallory asks.

"Gorslung's portrait will be the first," Aster says. "Only half done and it's a masterpiece. Hers is the only attempt that ever came close to satisfying him. All the others he's had burned. The paintings, and their makers."

"And she still took his commission?"

"You think you can say no to the Laurel Chancellor? If we run into him tonight, you should try."

"I think I can manage."

She takes his arm and leads him to the edge of the balcony, where gold shelves sag under steins and highballs and leaning elbows. Mallory's gaze passes over the orchestra, the black streaks of soot along the ceiling, the cracks in the frescoes, the beautiful, bulbous fasciations the Great Revival has left in the walls, the hundreds of glass shards hanging in lieu of chandeliers. The damage is only the latest in a thousand-year history of remodeling. Every tyrant who's ever sponsored (or laid siege to) the opera house has left some evidence of their presence, knowing that those names and reigns not committed to music would be forgotten. The violent tradition stretches back to before kings became chancellors and laurels their crowns, well before Tiliard was thrust into modernity with Vernhardt's discovery that Catoptric water, under certain circumstances, could burn.

Mallory's metal-sharp eyes miss nothing. He drinks in the theater not with idle sips, as champagne-cradling tourists are supposed to, but with desperate, pleasureless thirst. He wears the same searching look Elspeth does when she paints, as if beauty were not an abstraction, but sustenance.

"Not many theaters in the countryside?" Aster asks.

"A few." He narrows his eyes. "I was under the impression there would be seats."

"There used to be. Nowadays, if you want to sit, you have to talk your way up to paradise." She gestures to the highest boxes, obscured in curtains and statuary. "But you'd better change first. They'd sooner admit an assassin than a man wearing your jacket."

He laughs. "I've heard hell has better acoustics."

"Would you like to see it? After the show, I mean. They have a little bar down there, right under the stage."

"I'd love that."

The lights dim. The chatter rises with the orchestra. A few dancers appear onstage, and Aster, like the rest of the audience, ignores them. "So, you never did tell me where you were staying, vant Passand."

"Well, my … father died recently. He left me the keys to his house on Rebirth."

"Oh dear. Which end?"

"South." He smiles weakly. "It's not as bad as you'd think. Just an overgrown garden and a few missing walls. The front door was blown off in the Revival." He takes a cautious sip of his cocktail. "Makes the keys irrelevant, but it's still a lovely house. It might surprise you."

"Are you inviting me back to your place, vant Passand?"

"It's not as if you can invite me back to yours."

"Not unless you want to end the night in a prison cell. But if that appeals to you—"

"There you are! I was afraid I'd let you escape." The words swoop in from above, and an angel descends shortly after, trailing a gown of blue feathers. Elspeth appears at Mallory's side, wearing the scent of sky-lily and a crown of fluttering moths. "And *Aster,* thank God you're here. I wanted to show off this man, but no one within a mile is worthy of ogling him. They have no *taste.*" She slips her arm into his with some difficulty; either her perfume or her shoes have elevated her a head above him. "I promised him a good view of the pas de deux. He's friends with someone in the corps." She whispers the last word as if sharing a dangerous secret. "Who is it, Mal? Tell her."

"Demetrius Prophet," he says.

Aster strains to put a role to the name. "The understudy?"

"Thomas the Younger, now," Elspeth says. "Apparently the principal went a little too hard last night and—well, no one wants to die hungover."

A stony look crosses Mallory's face. "Have some faith, vralen."

"*Faith*—Mal, I prefer doubt. It's more dependable." Elspeth glances over the rabble. "Where's Flo the Impaler? This'll be the kind of bloodbath he enjoys."

"He's probably around somewhere," Aster says. "He knows I'm out shopping for his patron tonight."

"Oh, the Marshal will *love* Ludovico. I did his publicity nudes—long and wiry as a sight hound—" She waves her hand and her moths take lustrous flight, circling her coiffure. One veers awry and slaps onto Aster's forehead with wings the size of oak leaves. "So sorry, dear. New gift from the hubby. Insists I show it off—you know how he is. Apparently these are some cousin of the burglar moth."

"Bugbear moth, you mean?" Mallory asks.

Elspeth glances at him. "Isn't he quaint?" she says. "No perfume, and all dressed up like a gamine, like Little Orphan Clevette—you know, he's going to let me paint him."

Dread clenches in Aster's chest, though it may only be a clump of tissue she'll cough up later. "What about your patron, El?"

"What he doesn't know, et cetera." Her dark eyes turn toward the booths. "I imagine he's made his appearance by now?"

"I saw him with his contortionist," Aster offers.

"Oh, *lovely.* Still trying to squeeze a portrait out of her, is he?"

"Seems like it."

"Well. He can try his best." She makes a dismissive gesture with her fan, but there is worry in her voice. If tonight the Chancellor conceives a satisfactory facsimile of himself, even nine months in the making, it could beat out what Elspeth has to offer. Paint, no matter how beautiful, how alive, will not win out against flesh. "I should at least try to save my commission. Not to mention my marriage. Mal, you're in Aster's good hands. It was *such* a pleasure—"

She leans down to kiss Mallory on the cheek, then Aster on the tip of her nose. She turns and disappears in a fluttering blue glow, as a surge of music flows over the balcony. The audience cheers. Two bettors throw fists by the orchestra pit, and the chorus parts in preparation for the final act. The upper boxes rattle with anticipation, with laughter, with arguments and fervent copulation.

"Down south," Mallory says, "they say Tiliarders race their ballerinas like dogs."

"That's uncharitable," Aster replies. "It's more of a pit fight."

"Are you a fan?"

"I try to be, since I'm here so often. I'll watch anything, so long as there's no consumptive heroine." He chuckles, and she basks in the music of it. "I enjoy a good Aufhocker. Romances, histories … and I come for the weekly reportage, since the Marshal won't. He detests all of this."

"I heard he still carries off a singer every once in a while."

Aster prickles, wondering what seedy rumors Elspeth has already sown in his head. "He does occasionally request private performances."

"Performances of what nature?"

"Of a *private* nature, vant Passand."

He frowns. His lips part, as if readying another query, but a cheer turns his attention to the stage. Ludovico Pelagos glides from the wing, buoyed by a wave of applause. Nearly every inch of skin glints with gems, each facet a fallen antagonist, each gold band a successful season. Wearing enough wealth to pay his debts a dozen times over, he dances only for the love of the art, a love that has made many great men a great deal of money.

The doomed understudy is a black-haired, pale man, a little lankier than Aster expects, but startlingly handsome in the regalia of Thomas the Younger. He circles his enemy with self-assured grace, stride long and slow as a crane's. As he opens the duet with a husky baritone, murmurs ripple through the audience. Someone hisses as the princes retreat to opposite ends of the stage, taking their places on opposing sides of an ancient war.

Aster raises her lorgnette. Demetrius magnifies in her sight, long-nosed and a little devilish. Her heart races, though not for his striking looks, nor for the tragedy of his upcoming defeat, but for the cravat he has tied at his throat. Tucked against his bare skin, far more intimate than a handkerchief in a breast pocket, the embroidery is unmistakably Mallory's.

PHANTASM SUITE

Conundrum Street carves across Tiliard's face like a dueling scar, a wayward secant interrupting the concentric rings of nearby avenues. The gash is a declaration of the city's violent prehistory, though no one can quite decide how it was made, or when. True to its name, the street presents a riddle over which academics love to shed blood. Some attest it's the wound of an ancient conflict (as in Fran Montresor's poem "On War"), or a mark left when Tiliard's glorious forefathers felled their overgrown tree (as in Gilde Vernhardt's alchemic textbook *Göddernackt*), or the burrow of some dinosauric termite (as in *The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species*). The southwest end is infested with pedants; they swarm around historical sites, coring the sidewalks and defacing street signs with excerpts of their theses. Cafés and bars line the canals, boasting names like Bean Pulp and Pierre's Hole, where researchers and radicals gather to stage their arguments. Scholars lounge on the University's balconies and flick cigarette butts onto hopeful suitors below, while grand patrons of the arts amble about in their carriages, scouting for the next architect or florist or playwright of import. Their litters are both garish and fiendishly stealthy. A student with the frown of a great novelist will vanish at a crosswalk; a dancer with the restless stride of unrecognized talent will wake in a cab with her thumb pressed to a contract. Occasionally an industrialist will pass through campus to nip the bud of a promising young populist.

Guy has not set foot on Conundrum since the Museum of Natural History's last infestation of erosion roaches. Big as lapdogs and just as eager to chew bones, they're generally harmless except to mammoth-bone corsets and paleontological displays. (*And lose baby teeth,* Guy scrawled in the margins of his *Manual* the night he found one crawling toward Tyro's snoring mouth.) The boulevard, predictably, has remained unsolved since then. Entirely nocturnal, the street wears all shades of night at once, from respectable early evening to the criminal nadir of the witching hour. Dizzy strings of lanterns hang from awnings, lighting restaurants and galleries and lotus-dappled canals. On the patio of a cocktail bar, a violinist serenades a trio of lovers, indifferent or oblivious to the Crypsis operative throwing a black hood over a man at the next table. A geometric arrangement of acrobats rolls past a mugging; students gather to sketch the slavering poodles carved into the canal's bridges.

The street is tethered to order only by the distant shadow of the Palas. The eloquent threat of a building looms a few blocks northward, panes of watchful stained glass winking up its turrets. Golden light threads across armories and prison towers, up the dome that bumps against the broken half-moon like the puffed chest of a rival god.

The chaos only thickens as Guy steps into the emerald plaza, where Conundrum intersects Bast. The square is crowded as always, flanked by libraries and apartments and laboratories. To his left: the galleries of the Ministry of Aesthetics, porticos decorated with statuary salvaged from the banks of the Catoptric. And to his right, just beyond a line he cannot cross: the Tiliard Opera.

He slows to stare at the façade, the gargoyles he'd climbed as a boy, whose mossy horns he'd spent hours scrubbing with a toothbrush, and the intricate wood pillars commissioned by the great impresario Albrecht Vaughn. The marquee's glow is obscured under a hundred bouquets of bloodred mums. His heart leaps, and the alchemic ink band on his forearm tightens, a warning that will turn to searing pain in the span of a misdirected stride. Either in his ringing ear or his turning gut, he thinks he can feel the vibrations of the overture to *The Price of Beauty.*

"Look at *this,*" Three sneers. Guy flinches, but her words aren't directed at him. "Looks like the brothers got tired of drowning strays and decided to do some real work for once."

Guy follows her gaze to the Ministry of Aesthetics, where a lorry idles under the radiant new statue of the Grand Marshal. Custodians carry canvased shapes down the stairs while men in iron vine wave a crowd of bystanders away from the artillery in the truck bed. The vehicle's side is marked in bold, bronze script: *Sreckt Brothers Pest Control and Hex Removal.*

"Think the dispatcher crossed the lines somewhere?" Three grunts. She adjusts her tank and approaches the truck. Guy follows, heat of his tattoo relenting to a faint tingle. The men on the portico bristle at their approach, lifting their visors to cast evil looks. What seems to be the company's hedge witch sours the air with a malediction. In the nearby crowd, a hustler tries to solicit bets on who will win the inevitable conflict.

Three leads her team to the yawning atrium of the Ministry. The glass dome opens over them, green light illuminating a disassembled gallery. Paintings lie draped in burlap, little hints of vant Wron and Rebau exposed at their edges. Statuary leans in the corners, between stacks of fossilized libretti excavated from the riverside. Ancient constructs bump down the stairs in the arms of grunting custodians. The whole room has the frantic instability of a scene change.

"You robbing the place or what?" Three spits toward a Sreckt captain, identifiable by his golden pin. He turns, helmetless, and narrows one eye. Guy half expects a fight, until Dawn steps forward, hand outstretched.

"I'll be damned," he says. "Sergeant Bebber."

The Srecktman's eyes widen, then crescent over his smile. "Can't be. Can't fucking be. Night's getting weirder by the minute." His glove meets Dawn's in the salute of the Palas Infantry. "Well *met,* Corporal Flint. How long's it been?"

"Not since Ostlerfell," Dawn answers.

"And last we saw each other—astonished you remember, the shape you were in." He laughs, then turns to bark an order at the men struggling to move what Guy surmises is Tasarte's famous golden piano. "God. Last I heard, the Grand Marshal had you killed."

Dawn's lip curls. "On paper."

"Well, there are worse deaths for a soldier." Bebber clasps Dawn's shoulder. "True what they say, though, eh? All of us end up in pest control."

"At *Sreckt,* though?"

"Better than Borisch." He grins, knowing Dawn can't challenge him. Between the Brothers' lucrative overcity contracts, their patented equipment and well-stocked manufactories, the sole arena in which Borisch trounces its rival is the relative decency of its company jingle.

"Isn't there a sack of kittens somewhere that needs doing away with?" Three asks. "What are you doing at our call?"

"*Your* call?" Bebber raises a brow. "Not if you show up late and with too small a team."

Three exposes her gold tooth, fingers creaking as she cranks her fist.

"Massive job, then?" Dawn asks pleasantly.

"And a *weird* one. There's either a lot of them, or a big one, and it's hungry. Already ate through half the goddamn storage tunnels. Lost some real masterpieces to those things." Bebber fishes a cigarette out of his breast pocket. "We think the nest is somewhere under the square, near the Opera. But there's a show on, so we're going the long way. Smoke, Corporal? Suit yourself."

While Dawn and Three interrogate Bebber, Guy turns his attention to the atrium. He examines the walls, the stairs, and, leisurely pacing around the perimeter like a viewing gentleman, the art. With each gold-green flicker of the electric lamps, the statues seem to take on slightly different poses, revealing missing eyes and vermiculated torsos and moth-eaten holes in their marble drapery. When he pulls back a tarp to reveal vant Wron's *Afternoon Riverscape with Boat,* a little water leaks from the frame, damp with insectile secretions.

"You should crawl back home, kids," Bebber says. "We're not killing anything tonight. Orders are to evacuate, not eradicate."

"Orders from where?" Three asks.

"Sanitation."

She bristles at the invocation. "Really. They stepped off their thrones to call about a bug?"

"If you've got a problem, take it up with Species Management. We're just securing the goods until they get here. Biggest pest we're spraying is the collectors." He jerks his chin toward the portico, where a group of gentlemen swarm around a sculpture so dreamily bizarre it can't be anything but Merrett's infamous *Prism Storm.* "Come out of the woodwork, swear to God."

Three narrows her eyes. "Dawn, keep an eye on things. I have to make a call."

She strides down the steps, climbs into the Sreckt lorry, pushes its occupant aside, and commandeers the phone. She has sharply honed instincts when it comes to these little feints of intercompany warfare. Her time at Wherewithal has enabled her to spot the kind of petty sabotage that makes up most of the corporate landscape.

Bebber's men complain, looking to him for orders to expel her from the truck, but he's got his attention on Dawn. "So, Flint," he says. "There're still a few masterpieces down in storage in need of extraction. What do you say? Waltz in, waltz out, just like Broken Horse."

Dawn releases a bitter laugh. "All right."

"There's our corporal—always up for a sortie." Bebber leads him across the atrium, waxing heroic in his martial patois. Guy glances back to Three, then follows them to the adjacent hall. They march past marble galleries, libraries, past portraits of kings and taxidermized Laurel Chancellors propped up behind glass to forever reenact their greatest feats of statesmanship.

"How's life at Borisch, then?" Bebber asks. "Heard you got fleas in your barracks."

"Soot mites," Dawn replies. "They're more of a mascot."

"Sure, sure. And the stray kittens are ours." Bebber stops at the threshold to an ancient stairwell. Fumes rise from the depths, carrying the must of storage halls and sap-soaked power grids. Bebber pulls on his respirator, and Dawn follows.

Guy hesitates at the landing. The stairs descend into darkness thick as water, rippling with an echo of unearthly music. The dregs of the opera, he realizes, leaking through the petrified wood of Conundrum Street. His heart clenches.

“Thing’s been eating the whole place,” Bebber says. “Seems to like early Demirealism. Took out a whole decade of the stuff in that tunnel—you know, the same one where there was that whole business with the Mammoth Stag Cult. It was Sigurd or something. I don’t know.”

“Sigmund,” Guy says quietly. “Sigmund the Torturer. He kept his captives in the tunnels below the Opera.”

Neither Dawn nor Bebber hear him. They proceed down the stairs, chatter muffled by the clinking and sloshing of their equipment, until they fade into the gloom. Guy secures his facepiece and iron-vine collar, strains his ears for the ghostly echo of music, and descends after them.

★ ★ ★

It’s a sad, odd feeling, to envy a dead man. As Aster watches the two princes sing and dance the brotherly drama that led to the War of the Lilies, a flush colors her cheeks. She keeps her gaze fixed on Demetrius and his cravat, groping a passing usher boy for another drink. The man is a daunting competitor, with his sleek black hair and his fierce voice. She is almost relieved he will not survive the night.

She glances to Mallory, searching his honey-brown gaze for anxiety, resignation, sorrow. Perhaps it is only the haze of her perfume, but he seems more determined than anything.

“How much do you have riding on Demetrius?” Aster asks.

“Quite a bit, actually.”

She returns her attention to the stage. While the leads polish their rivalry, taunting with bent knees and curled toes, their seconds polish their blades. Before they are handed off to the princes, the tip of each rapier is dipped, with a harp’s glissando, into a tiny, silver rhyton. Rosewater, with a touch of ecdytoxin, just potent enough to be fatal. There is no death more graceful, the Chancellor insists.

“Are you two close?” she asks cautiously.

“You could say so. Mostly when we were younger.”

“How did you meet?”

He hesitates. “A bit like you and Elspeth did. We were in Mongfestun together.”

“*Mongfestun?*” A thrill leaps to her throat. Her eyes glide over him again, taking in his feathers, his lithe, gaudy frame. He has to be lying—though it would explain his good posture. “I’d never have guessed you’ve been to prison.”

“Military reformatory, technically.” He smiles. “Mongfestun Correctional College for Recalcitrant Boys and Young Men.”

Aster aches to ask him for what offenses, for how long, if he was sent there by his exasperated family or by a criminal judge, if he had been a mouthy prince or a common horse thief. “Demetrius might stand a chance then,” she offers instead. “I’ve heard Mongfestun sculpts quite the duelists.”

“It does. Dee’s tetchy as a blast mouse and a wonder with a saber.” He leans over the balustrade, watching the man take his sword. Demetrius’s body moves like his voice, boldly, with an unpolished edge. “He never graduated, though. Escaped in fourth year.”

“Really? How?”

“We were on mill duty. He made me sew him into a flour sack and send him off with the delivery carriage. He was sold to a baker at Sullen Head. Cut himself free and ran off with a troupe of actors.”

Aster laughs. It doesn’t take a perfumer’s nose to sense he’s toying with her. “You’re not a very good liar, vant Passand.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s not the *truth,* it’s Aufhocker. Olaf Aufhocker. That’s a scene from *Sins of Our Patrons.*”

“What do you think inspired us?”

“Even *if*—” She smacks him with her fan. “That one is by far his worst work.”

“It’s a classic, vralen. The one that launched Revivalist theater.”

“*A Gentleman of the Void* launched Revivalist theater. *Patrons* is a fantastical mess. I hear even he hates it.”

“You’ve met him?”

“No. Few people have. He keeps his circle tight. He didn’t even come to the ceremony when he was made Dramaturge Laureate. The man is a notorious recluse.”

“Well,” Mallory says, plucking another drink from a nearby tray. “If I had to drag around a name like Olaf Aufhocker, I wouldn’t show my face in public either.”

The cymbal crashes. Variations concluded, the brothers retreat to the corps of the North and South, stretching their wrists while the orchestra retunes. Their seconds present their blades, and they circle one another. Each adopts a bowed pose, front leg straight, back bent. The air tenses.

“Fucking *on* with it!” someone shouts. The piccolo signals the draw, and on the next downbeat, they begin.

The blades clash. The princes advance across the stage, every step choreographed with deadly precision, every thrust and parry sharpened to a fraction of a beat. The routine moves with terrible speed, a delicate balance of perfect repetition and minute improvisations. Aster grits her teeth, waiting for the misstep that will send a saber askew, the mispositioned arm that will prove a fatal opening.

Ludovico dances with hypnotizing flair, each movement blossoming seamlessly from the last. His sword glints with quintessential Revivalist flourish, a beauty so relentless that even his most steadfast opponents die in exquisite poses. Demetrius is far messier, almost unpracticed; his grunts are ugly, his movement wild, his rhythm syncopated. The crowd quiets for each second he stays on his feet. Jeers fade, and as the music mounts a crest, all eyes lock on him. Time itself seems to clench as the theater intakes a collective breath. It's an oppressive feeling, the same Aster gets right before she coughs up something heinous.

Not now, she begs herself. Her throat tightens and a cold sweat pricks her forehead, and as she leans forward, Mallory's arm encircles her waist. He tenses as the orchestra thrusts out the first violent measures of the coda. Chords erupt into one another, tympani roll, a fermata stretches open, and suddenly, Demetrius breaks from script.

A legal but still unthinkable move, he improvises a falter, changing position at the last moment. With his neck exposed, Ludovico wastes no time. A blade flashes by his throat, splitting open his cravat in a spray of red. The audience cheers—a curse escapes Mallory's mouth, but as Demetrius twists, sword whipping through the light, it becomes clear the blood is only the bright threads of his embroidery. He pirouettes, angling toward Ludovico's flank. A dissonant chord resolves, and the pas de deux ends with a solid thrust.

Metal glides into meat. The music dies, the crowd falls still. Ludovico gasps, held in an elegant lean at the end of his opponent's sword. The performers stare at one another for a burning second, then Demetrius withdraws. His antagonist staggers, then falls to one knee, eyes wide in disbelief, even as the proof of his defeat blossoms on his shirt. The efflorescence of red expands under the stage lights, and as Ludovico falls onto his back, something unfolds from his wound. Seeded by the droplet of ecdytoxin, a stem of bone cracks upward from between his ribs. Leaves of fascia expand from his broken skin, opening to release petals of paper-thin muscle. The lily unfurls from Ludovico, threading his veins into its bright corolla, growing with each shudder of his final breaths.

Demetrius undoes his torn cravat, wipes the sweat from his face, then plucks the lily from his opponent. Cradling it in a bed of torn threads, he raises it to toast the Chancellor and his bride.

As history may or may not have told, civil order dies with Thomas the Elder. Insults and cheers roar from every corner of the theater; fights break out; a man is pushed from the balcony. Hats are tossed in celebration, bottles in fury. A fusillade of thrown objects picks off the chorus of the South End Army. By the time the medics arrive in the wings, half the orchestra has defected. A few of Ludovico's more ardent fans try to claw their way onto the proscenium, and the stage manager hobbles out to rescue the lily before his admirers can grab hold of it.

Demetrius doesn't retreat, but basks in the chaos. Ladies in the front scream for him to throw his cravat, but he denies them, holding it coyly against his lips. His eyes sweep the crowd, until they settle on Aster—no, not on her, she realizes, when Mallory releases a held sigh. Demetrius holds Mallory's gaze, frozen in his victorious pose even as bottles sail by his head, until someone musters the smarts to cut the curtain rope and a wave of silk falls haphazardly over the stage.

★ ★ ★

The petrified tunnels under Conundrum are anything but silent. Veiny wiring hums along the ceilings, carrying power from the roots to the muffled bustle above. The pounding of distant factories beats through the walls. Water hisses along termite tracks, resonant as organ pipes.

Guy strains his ear and lights his torch, revealing a passage cramped with art and artifacts. Beneath the din, beneath the mumble of Bebber's fading voice, a whisper of music spills from the darkness. He sips at the melody's edge, pushing through history's artistic dregs, rejects of memory and good taste, paintings of battles never fought and rulers never coronated. Fantastical landscapes pass him by, huge canvases of rolling dark water, of pristine forest, of impossibly rectangular skylines. Oily political manifestos and calls to arms lurk in the gloom, streaked in gray and green and occasionally that gorgeous blue for which Dawn had taken four bullets to the abdomen.

The music throbs across his ear, louder with each beat of his heart. He gropes onward, desperate for it, but each stride seems smaller than his last, paradoxical, as if the distance between himself and the Opera will only halve, infinitely. He struggles past grinning busts and shrieks of bright paint, stretching for a memory, for a scrap of the beauty he had stolen in childhood. His ear rings with pain, with scurrying bowstrings, with tapping snares—and in the darkest reach of the passageway, he stumbles upon a familiar chord.

Not too far above him, he knows, lie the tunnels and pockets of hell. And not too far above that lies the stage. He can almost

see the lights burning, stoked red for the final act of *The Price of Beauty.* They will be dragging out the sacrifice now from stage left; the heroic entomologist will be tied to a dais by Sigmund the Torturer, offered as tribute to the Mammoth Stag. The role, prestigious but not coveted, is reserved only for the basest and bravest of debtors. The tragic scientist's death is never swift, and its method depends only on the prop master's whim. Usually a pair of long blades, welded onto the face of the mechanical Stag—once, a terrible and fascinating performance Guy will not forget, a beak of heated metal—but tonight, he knows the insect will be no puppet. The pincers will be real, as will the venomous forelegs, the long, barbed tongue—

His ear burns, and he staggers, shaking the scene loose from his head. Sure that he has a leak somewhere, he checks and rechecks his vents, running his fingers along the edges of his respirator. All is intact. He takes a few tight breaths, clenching his jaw against the echoes of warped music.

When he realizes he is alone, he tries to retrace his steps. He calls for Dawn, but his voice spills unanswered through the maze of discarded artworks. He turns left, then right, and climbs up a sloping shaft back toward the Ministry.

After a few minutes of wandering the mossy dark, his torch sputters. He curses, turns, and bumps against a statue of a rearing horse. He reaches out to regain his balance, but the marble is soft, chewed—it gives way under his hand and he falls to one knee. Shaken but unharmed, he bats his torch back to life. In the dampened glow of blue light, he finds he has landed against a pile of flesh and warped tubing that, after a breathless moment, he recognizes as Sergeant Bebber.

FAUSTECH

The foyer is a battlefield. After what can only be tangentially defined as a curtain call, the audience swarms the ticket office. Payouts are collected by force, half of which are immediately pilfered by pickpockets. Accusations of cheating abound. Arguments break out in the galleries, and a long-brewing conflict between an upstart financier and the Sommelier Laureate comes to open-handed blows.

Driven with equal parts adoration and revilement, the press and critics storm the halls to search for Demetrius Prophet. A few adamant theatergoers capture the impresario in the cloakroom and beat him until he announces an investigation into the cast and crew of *The Lilies.*

"The bastard better survive until Acid Moon," Aster mutters, struck suddenly by the image of the impresario's carriage pulling up to the Palas to deliver not a premier soloist, but an understudy's corpse. She doesn't want to think of the look on Sorav's face. He endures threats, assaults, death itself with invincible grace, but he reserves a unique loathing for absurdities. An exhausting inclination in a city where the water burns and the wood boils.

"Should I escort you home?" Mallory asks, returning unharmed from the booking window. When he tucks his winnings into his jacket pocket, she cranes her neck, trying to gauge the thickness of the envelope. "You all right, Vost?" he asks. "You look faint."

"Could use another drink," she mutters, before a whip of perfume draws her eyes to the stairway. A cloud of moths flutters at the landing. Elspeth is human height again, either because her scent has decayed, or because it's obscured by the intensity of her fiancé's. The Laurel Chancellor wears ecdytoxin heavy enough that Aster would hesitate to strike a match around him, but that doesn't stop his trail of company men from crawling over each other to light his cigar.

He locks eyes with Aster and parts his beard in a handsome smile. He's wearing something thorny, something that captures and holds the gaze (essence of pact-rose, she guesses). She stands paralyzed as the Chancellor makes his way down the stairs, Elspeth following like an afterthought.

"Vost?" Mallory asks.

"Hold your breath, vant Passand," she mutters. "Here he comes."

"Who?"

"The worst of Tiliard's many bad men."

"High praise, in a town with only one good one," Mallory says, but the moment he glances up the stairs, he too is ensnared.

"Asteritha Vost," the Chancellor says. Every syllable drips, but none so viscidly as the last, the little *t* crossed with a gleeful tap of his tongue. His breath is heavy with perfume, layers of scents weaving and winding with each movement of his lips.

"Good evening, Eir Chancellor," Aster says.

"And what an evening! This is why Aufhocker is such magic—no matter what happens, it's just *exhilarating.*" His smile is radiant, a white, impenetrable wall. "The reign of Ludovico has ended. Usurped by a debutant! God, I've been craving a good underdog tale. You know, El was just saying that Prophet would be a good candidate to play me at the wedding. I could see him as a younger version of myself, I really could."

"Maybe you should offer him a contract," Aster says.

"If I can still afford him, after all this!" The Chancellor's laugh is soft but assured. No matter how much money he's lost tonight, no matter how many alliances, he will bounce back. He is a Revivalist in more ways than one. "And you're…" he continues, glancing at Mallory. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

Elspeth leans to his ear, either to whisper or to pose for the nearest flashbulb. They do make a photogenic couple, she glowing with the cynicism of youth, he with the sleek wisdom of middle age.

"Ah, the country boy," the Chancellor says, offering his bare hand. "Welcome to our fair stump."

"Honored, Eir Gorslung." Their palms engage with a friendly puff of hyssop.

"You chose the right night to come to the opera, my boy. You've just witnessed history remade. I suspect quite a few fortunes are about to change hands." He spares an amused glance for the corporate alliances unraveling in the balconies. "Not that I'm complaining. I haven't had this much fun in *years.* You—be a dear and go fetch that lily." A nearby sycophant nods and disappears. A Crypsis agent, by the subtle smell of him. "So—will you be staying on, then?"

"On for what?" Mallory asks.

"The next show. You didn't think we were going to close the night with *The Lilies,* did you? Not in my opera. I serve dessert."

"Next up is *A House Call,*" Elspeth offers, voice subdued under her fiancé's perfume. "Mal hasn't seen a gentleman's playlet yet."

"It's a Tiliarder staple." The Chancellor rolls one of Elspeth's jeweled earlobes between his fingers, moths crawling down his bare hand. "Fae Blush is playing Karlotta. The orgy scene is truly something special this season."

"Kind," Aster answers. "But I can't. Must get back to the Marshal."

"The *Marshal*." The Chancellor's brow furrows over fatherly green eyes. "You know Max is misusing you, my dear. When you're ready, my offer still stands. I can put your talents to better use." He turns to Mallory. "You know what they say about this one? That she's the next Madame Fauniche. And all the Marshal wants from her is to drug him with mayfly. An utter waste. There are *masterpieces* inside this one, Eir vant Passand, mark my words."

"I'm … thank you—" Aster pauses to disentangle herself from his flattery. "I'm afraid I'm contracted for life."

"A cheat, when the Revenant has dozens." The Chancellor sighs. "Well, how about you, young man?"

"Oh," Mallory starts, "I only embroider."

"No, I mean, are you going to stay?"

Aster's heart sinks. The shape of Mallory's smile is familiar, compliant. The man will spend the night in the Chancellor's thrall, in a state of scent-manufactured ecstasy—until he wears out his novelty, after which he'll find himself abandoned in some alley, or hurled from a limousine window.

"*Stay,*" the Chancellor's tongue says, in the way that renders the listener unable to do anything but ask for how long, and in what position.

Mallory hesitates. The silence stretches, eruptive, until Aster is sure she's going to cough.

"I'd love to, Eir Chancellor," Mallory says, finally. "But Aster promised me a tour of hell."

The Chancellor doesn't lose his smile. "Ah, you might as well. I'll probably spend the evening doing damage control, anyway." He gestures to a pair of tuxedos entangled on the mezzanine. "I think one of the Sreckt brothers is about to kill my Minister of Finance."

★ ★ ★

Bebber lies facedown and motionless. Guy recognizes him only by the gold trim on what's left of his tank. The sturdy straps lie shredded; poisons drip from broken glass in thick, viscous fingers. Even the intricate Sreckt metalwork, unsurpassed in the industry, has been warped by some uncanny force, as if the pesticide sacs had burst from the inside.

"Hey," Guy croaks. He creeps forward and sets down his torch. "Sergeant?"

Stomach churning, he pushes Bebber onto his back. He rolls on a limp frame, his body too soft, too malleable, bones bending like wet branches. His helmet bobs on a flaccid neck, tongue pressed up against the glass of his mask, swollen and gray.

Guy forces a cry back down his throat. He paws at Bebber's collar, knowing the futility of feeling for a pulse between the layers of iron vine. There don't seem to be any barbs in his suit, no teeth, detached stingers, or other biological weaponry, but Guy can't know until he gets Bebber back up into the light. He gropes for the sergeant's arm, intending to drape it over his shoulder, and only finds a deformed length of softened flesh.

Not so much severed as remade, the man's arm has burst open, spilling a dark, membranous substance. It bubbles up from iron vine and leather, oozing between swollen fingers—too many fingers—eight or nine, arranged in a circle, and a dozen stubs blossoming between them, tipped in incandescence. Guy's heart lurches, not entirely with horror, but with a kind of breathless awe. Terrified less by Bebber's corpse than he is by its strange beauty, he tells himself this is only a trick of torchlight. In his panic, he has projected a terrible image onto a wax sculpture, a mannequin, a pile of discarded costumes. But he, more than anyone, knows better than to believe his own stories.

Something drips to the floor by his arm. He flinches, ear ringing with a tremolo of dread. He knows he shouldn't lift his eyes. He knows that to look up will invite the curtain to fall, the trap to spring.

He can't help it. He raises his gaze to the ceiling and stares down a wondrous kaleidoscope. The nest is a wide tunnel, scintillating with color, a huge, writhing honeycomb of iridescence. Electrical sap drips from gnawed wiring. Broken crossbeams jut across the hollow, spears on which all manner of objects have been impaled. Oil canvases dangle by splintered frames, costumes drip with colored secretions, half-devoured theatrical puppets poise rigid like flies on a shrike's thorn. A globule of some sort of exudate gathers at the edge of a beam, oozes downward, and drops. As it hits the ground, an orchestral chord throbs through Guy's ear.

"*How,*" he hisses into his mask. As he gazes into the beautiful, uncanny nest, he realizes that, although he cannot know how,

he knows, instinctively, what.

A noise echoes through the hollow, the wet shift of moving rot. Life returns to Guy's muscles, and he retreats to the headless horse. He flattens himself against its belly and holds his breath, peering between its kicking forelegs.

A dance approaches from above, syncopated on a hundred insectile feet. A huge, wrinkled head emerges from the nest, glistening in the sparks of chewed wiring. A segmented body follows, one pair of legs after another, after another. It's larger than Guy remembers, its bristles more numerous, wet with congealed venom. Fragments of an exoskeleton peel from its bulging segments, sheaths of chitinous armor from its legs. The thing, he realizes with cold horror, is molting.

He freezes, one hand on his nozzle, the other in the pin of a phlogiston grenade. As the monster slithers above him, music dripping in its wake, guilt and terror wrestle in his head. He wants, so badly, to run, but he knows he will not make it far. Even ill-equipped and alone, he must take his chance. He's survived this thing once, and this time he's caught it mid-molt. It will never be softer, more vulnerable.

His toes curl, his trigger finger shifts, and his glove emits a tiny squeak.

The creature snaps its attention downward. It detaches its front legs from the ceiling, spines shivering erect, and lowers its head to the statue. Slowly, its face unfolds, black void of its throat dilating and contracting like a massive pupil. A silver proboscis glides from its mouth, gathering airborne flecks of paint and dust. The appendage creeps down the horse's flank, then to its underside, tiny barbs undulating against the marble. Pearls of liquid stone run like blood wherever it touches the statue.

Guy holds his breath, ear throbbing with his heartbeat. His finger curls over his trigger, but he can't move. Panic rings so loudly in his ear he doesn't hear the clatter of falling canvases, nor his name shouted through the dust. He doesn't even know Dawn has found him until a nozzle flashes and a string of sulfluoride pellets detonates in the murk.

The monster retracts its tongue, blinks its throat, and then, swifter than a creature of that size has any right to be, launches itself toward Dawn.

★ ★ ★

Like any good leading man, Mallory is happy to exit through hell. Aster leads him by the wrist, slightly too drunk to manage the stairs alone, not too drunk to accept the snifter an usher boy places into her hand. Hell is overcrowded, as usual, packed with theatergoers and cast and crew. Little devils and unbaptized children flit between tables, introducing flaming cocktails to outstretched hands and unsecured strands of hair.

Aster points out the historic props, the artwork deformed by Revivalist ecdytoxin, the chute up to the proscenium that swallows Faustech or Don Javunech or Dante in a column of fire. Audiences may watch from hell as the funnel deposits the damned directly onto a stool at the counter, and any performer who survives his immolation gets free drinks for life (truncated though his life may turn out to be).

"They don't write about this place in the tourist pamphlets, do they?" Aster asks Mallory.

"I imagine not," he says as she leads him between a game of pillbug dice and a pair of increasingly nude lovers, through the throng of newsmen giddy about the fall of Ludovico. As they order cocktails, a reporter in a red coat climbs onto a table, offering a wager to the crowd on how soon Demetrius will be made Danseur Laureate. A woman with a monkey on her shoulder shouts him down, taking bets on how long before he's killed. The monkey takes bets on the method.

"Not the worst stir Dee's caused," Mallory mutters, blowing out the flame on his drink.

"Well, the Chancellor seemed to enjoy it," Aster replies. "Which means Demetrius will get to survive the evening."

"Evening's not over, vralen."

"Here's to hoping the next show goes well, then," Aster says. Suddenly, guilt pricks at her, and she wonders if she should confess to him that she's bought Demetrius for forty thousand marks, that by Acid Moon Mallory's friend or lover or acquaintance—whatever the man is to him—will find himself a hireling of the Marshal Revenant, if only for a single, secretive night.

"I'm sorry," she mutters, without knowing why.

Mallory doesn't hear her. The first bright chords of *A House Call* are already tumbling down the shaft. "God," he breathes, lifting his drink to his mouth. "Strong stuff."

"It's only sulfur gin," Aster says.

"No, I meant the Chancellor's perfume. I'm just now screwing my head back on." He sniffs at his glove. "This is going to leave a rash."

"The Chancellor is known to spread a certain type of rash. Though it usually takes more than a handshake."

Mallory laughs. "You were right, though. He is a difficult man to resist."

"It's that sleepbug pheromone. And kilterwort. You know, like they use in Parish ceremonies. Tends to induce compliance."

"You're spilling state secrets, vralen."

"State secrets—those are Fauniche recipes. Sandalwood for strength, myrrh for equilibrium, et cetera." When she glances at his crooked smile, the honey rings of his eyes, she can't help but think how fetching he'd be in a cloud of linnetwood. "You don't have much perfumery down in plum country, do you?"

"Not like they do here."

"Well, show me your wrists, vant Passand," she says. "And I'll tell you what to wear on them."

He only smiles and throws a silver mark to a passing usher.

"Still chaos in the foyer, Eir Patron," the child reports. "Rowdy playlet tonight. Chancellor's got his box locked down. Maybe take the back stairs."

Mallory glances back to Aster. "What do you say, vralen?"

"There's an old corridor that can take us to the alleys by Conundrum," she says. "Supposedly built by Sigmund the Torturer, during the Demirealist days. Or maybe just termites."

"Quite the termites."

"This place used to be overrun with all sorts of things. Urea wasps in the toilets, hellrats in the walls. Revolutionaries in the dressing rooms."

"Teratopods in the basement."

"Well, not since the Revival." She finishes her drink. "The Marshal cleared out every pest in the vicinity."

Mallory's laugh is dark, self-satisfied in a way Aster can't find anything but conspiratorial. "Does he really think so?"

"What would you know about bugs, country boy?" she asks. "Do you even have mosquitoes out in the dead world?"

"Sure we do. And plum weevils. Even a few beetles exported from the city. Most of our pests are human, though."

Aster takes in his wicked smile. She knows she shouldn't ask. She's already drunk far too much, stayed out far too late, and the Marshal will need scents for his bath. At the very least, he'll need something from her in the morning, for a state breakfast, for a meeting, for a confrontation with whatever parliamentarian will play his antagonist this season. He's probably already sent agents to collect her, but tonight, freed by drink and the chaos of *The Lilies,* she can't bring herself to care.

"Well, Eir vant Passand," she starts, "would you like to see what a real infestation looks like?"

★ ★ ★

In the Sreckt lorry, lopsided on the steps to the Ministry's portico, Three listens to the chatter on the other side of the telephone, growing less pleased by the second. When she's heard enough, she uncrosses her boots on the dashboard and throws down the earpiece. A few Sreckt men gaze at her through the windshield, and because Guy is nowhere nearby, she directs her ill will toward them instead.

"That wasn't fucking Sanitation," she concludes.

★ ★ ★

Before Guy can fire, before he can even scream, the monstrous centipede is already barreling toward its new assailant. Its hulking shadow threads through the murk, arcing over statues and canvases. As it closes in, it unfurls its silver tongue in a luminescent spume of mucus.

Dawn backs up against clattering canvases and shoots the thing again, burying a canister in its belly. While it reels, he cranks open another cannula. His muzzle cracks, spraying a mist of pesticidal buckshot, but that doesn't stop the creature. Legs screeching like rosined strings, it crashes into him, and he disappears under a flurry of spines and flailing proboscis.

Dawn's name is agony in Guy's mouth. His legs spring forward without his input, his fingers unlock every emergency stopper on his nozzle. Breathless, terrified, he drains half his tank into the reserve sac before clicking a canister into place. Vitriol of Lun, phlogiston, every corrosive, every fulminate, every poison his fingers can reach—he doesn't pause to consider if a layer of iron vine alone will protect him against the incendiary cocktail in his tank. He thinks nothing of the hundreds of years of history accumulated around him, nor of the busy street above, but only of Dawn, crushed in the grip of the monster.

He raises his carbine and showers the facility in a deathly yellow haze.

The centipede howls in the flood of burning fumigants, abandoning Dawn and lurching up to its nest, fragments of its exoskeleton sloughing from singed limbs. The walls warp in the heat of cross-reacting chemicals; paint runs down the solemn faces of Chancellors and marauder queens, statues bend and grimace as flames of volatile toxins lick down the tunnel.

Guy's iron vine burns around his chest. A crack snaps across the glass of his mask, bisecting the creature's belly as it writhes back into the ceiling. Globules of blood or venom run down its legs, and its tongue whips against the walls, dislodging splinters of wood and paint and music in streaks of iridescence.

Then, violently, fatally, it sheds its exoskeleton. Plates splinter, ribbons of burnt flesh bubble between shattered terga. The creature peels apart, budding, sprouting heads and legs and long, segmented bodies. With one great, mortal shriek, it unfolds,

expands, and releases a wriggling, wet mass of progeny.

Guy cries out, aiming an empty nozzle at the animals as they dart along the sugar-wires, dissolving into the haze of flames and fumes. The air blurs with heat, with pressure, and Guy manages only a short gasp and a shorter prayer before the bloated mass of half-formed centipedes bursts into the bustling square above.

★ ★ ★

Aster leads Mallory through the narrow corridors of the Opera, stumbling past the lavatories and ushers' quarters and private dancing suites, into the maze where the hallways end and the alleyways begin. Step by drunken step, the boundaries of the theater dissolve. The lights flicker, the smell of incense and perfume makes way for electric sap. Gold leaf morphs to bare brick, carpet tangles with moss, sequins and candlelight glint into firefly lamps.

She guides him up a staircase of rotting wood, steep as a ladder, and hot night air fills her lungs. They emerge into a backstreet by Conundrum Square, a winding thicket of wood and brick and iron. Remnants of disaster line the street. Under their feet runs the tip of the plaza's great scar, an old wound healed with a plaster of jewels. Above their heads twist the pillars and gargoyles of the Opera's former façade, deformed with toxic runoff. Statuary springs up around them, warped fragments of history commemorating the Incident that began the Great Revival. Considered noxious by the Tourism Bureau, visitors caught staring for too long at the monuments are issued a fine of thirty marks.

"This is it," she tells Mallory, leading him between the deformed bronze legs of the Grand Marshal Exultant. "The first works of Revivalism, they say."

Mallory says nothing for a long time. She expects him to react as all the tourists do, speechless with equal parts disgust and awe, but he seems more somber than anything. Boldly, almost angrily, he runs a hand over the lobulated rump of a rearing horse. His eyes follow the deformity up its side, to its withers, where its neck bubbles into empty air.

"Were you there when it happened?" he asks.

"No. Though that didn't matter in the end." She sighs, looking over the chewed busts, the cluster of kings sprouting from a huge bronze rose, the hound frozen mid-leap, marble melting from its sides as if it had just jumped from water. Its tongue glows behind its smile, toothy as Guylag's dragon.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Aster asks. "You have to admit."

"Sure." Mallory falls quiet, radiating heat. "Though, you know, vralen. I don't care much for beauty."

Aster can't help herself. Driven by his strange solemnity as much as her jealous image of Demetrius's lips against his cravat, she grips his embroidered collar and gently pushes him against the leg of the Marshal's statue. Fire expands behind her sternum, and for half a second, she dares to imagine forcing her poisonous mouth against his, wet with the toxic particles of her breath.

Just beyond the sculptures, the crowd bustles through the square, oblivious to her fingers at his neck, her perfume licking greedily at his edges. As she leans toward him, she knows he will turn away from her in disgust. She knows he'll try to escape, this poor stranger. He'll run, and she'll chase him, shambling and wheezing like the monsters from *Tulip Food*—or he'll fight, knocking her to the ground and wrapping his hands around her neck, covering her mouth with his glove, desperate to keep her poison from touching him.

She is doomed to a breathless death anyway, so better that Mallory do it—and isn't it a bit romantic, *so classically Vaughnian,* Elspeth would say, to get murdered by one's impassioned lover? Better than dying like Larbella, coughing out her final trills in a huge bloody clot, or like the Chancellor's perfumers, overworked, bled dry, and thrown to the centipedes. Aster wants her last breath to be clear, and full, and terrified. She wants to be alive for it.

"Vralen," Mallory asks. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes snap open. The fantasy flees, and she slumps against the statue.

"I feel sick," she whispers.

"Need me to hold your hair while you hurl on the Grand Marshal's shoes?"

"Not that kind of—"

She stops, ears perked. Behind her, a rumble of panic takes hold of the square. Someone shouts. The crack of wood follows, then the shriek of huge hinges.

Aster glances toward the plaza, peering between distorted marble limbs to see a frantic crowd stumbling from the Opera. She glances back to Mallory, meets his widened gaze, then ducks under the Grand Marshal's statue. She pushes through the thicket of half-eaten art and staggers into the light of the square. She braces herself against the oncoming crowd, craning her neck for the source of the panic. A bright, familiar smell meets her nose, and a quartet of alarm bells rings out from the towers of the Judicial Palas.

A cloud of fumigant pours into the square, eliciting another wave of screams. A man shoves past her, shouting at her to

move, and she has no choice but to fall in with the crowd. She turns, head spinning, and only gets ten or so steps into a trot when her breath catches, snagged in a net of phlegm. She stumbles, holding her constricting throat as bodies bump past her, fleeing the thickening stench. Yellow smoke swallows the farthest edge of the square, and the crowd begins to disappear in the haze.

Someone grasps her wrist and pulls her upright. Teary-eyed, she struggles to make out Mallory's face.

"What's happening?" she coughs.

He glances over his shoulder with a blurred grimace, something a little too close to a smile.

"Can't say I'd like to stay and find out," he says.

★ ★ ★

Later, witnesses will describe the Conundrum Incident not as an explosion, but a hatching. The event is never clearly elucidated, but it is printed in the tabloids within the day, and set to verse within the week. In eight months, the Dramaturge Laureate will produce a poorly researched and poorly received adaptation of the disaster, entitled *Sons and Brothers: A Summary of the Battle for Conundrum in B Miniature.* The actual bioalchemic mechanism of the event will never become public knowledge, though it will be described in great detail in a cryptic monograph by venerated polymath and notorious felon Dr. Reames Gorslung, written entirely in his sleep.

It lasts for half a minute, but it is felt half a mile away; it propagates through the ground as a tremor, and through the air as a burst of sound, a mutilated orchestral stinger. A fissure splits the square from the Ministry to the Opera. The street peels away, shedding cobblestones like scales. Marble kings and patrons deform in the rising heat, foremost among them the new statue of the Grand Marshal Exultant, melting into a bulge of chitin and wriggling legs and bronze. Sap-wires break and bleed. Partially digested art is buoyed up from the vaults on an effluvium of burning fumigants.

It's impossible to tell what exactly emerges from the rancid murk. It boils and howls along the square, oozing new appendages until a dozen long-bodied creatures, young and soft and hungry, detach from it. The city warps under them. Wood splits at the touch of their venomous forelegs, polyps of brick bloom under barbed tongues, unlucky citizens crumple and deform in the onslaught of mouthparts. Dripping with toxic afterbirth, the monster's progeny scatter, squirming through broken windows and sewage grates and chimney pipes.

The moment before the street opens and vomits a deluge of paint and insects, a photojournalist struggles under the marquee of the Opera, waiting for a shot of the debutant that has stunned the audience with his flawless performance of Sigmund the Torturer. Ludovico Pelagos holds aloft the severed thumb of his victim, grinning, until a rumble nearly shakes his prize from his hand.

The photographer turns her eye to the source of the chaos; her stint as a reporter in Ostlerfell has taught her to muster her will in a dangerous pinch. She kneels, focuses, and though she doesn't capture the event itself (no one does), she does capture the aftermath.

She sweeps the scene, passing over fleeing bystanders as they hike their skirts above the flood of paint and sewage, wading in either blood or a perfect mixture of Oxid Brown and Bastard Crimson. She focuses on the heart of the square, on the debris of aesthetic flotsam, and spies two survivors emerging from under the splayed legs of the Marshal's felled statue. Dressed in the dull brown of Borisch & Sons, a hireling pulls another from the wreckage. The larger man lifts the smaller away from the column of fumigants before he drops to his knees and pulls off his mask. As the respirator falls, the journalist feels a twinge of recognition. She knows this man. She's captured his broad jaw and crystalline stare before, though he had been wearing a different uniform then. The image was printed in sepia on the front page of the *Lunar Herald* and delivered to every doorstep the day the Ostlerfell War ended.

As the man lays his partner down in the rubble, kneeling over him like a devotee over a martyr, she captures him again. Perfectly timed, perfectly composed, the picture immortalizes a moment of profound tenderness in the chaos. She has no idea what is happening, but realizes with painful clarity that this is the photograph she has grasped for her whole career, this is the reason the camera was rediscovered, the reason light itself bends through a lens. It is the best picture she will ever take.

LAMENT FOR A LOST SOLDIER

Ever since the Revival, or so it seems to Maximian Sorav, Tiliard has existed without edges. It has a rim, of course, sloped or sheer or splintered depending on how the ages have shaped the stump, but the city itself sprawls in defiance of physical constraint. During the smoky season, the concentric neighborhoods seem to expand forever into the gray haze, but it is under the stark green eye of the Mint Moon that it truly becomes clear that Tiliard is limitless.

When it cannot grow out, it settles for down, when it cannot crawl skyward, it turns inward. An ingrown hair, Maximian might complain to Olaf (the only one who endures his rough and ugly brushes with metaphor). A shoot curled into itself, half-erupted. The filth and rot, the centuries of petty tyrants cycling through positions like hands on a clock—symptoms of an organism arrested in its larval stage. Tiliard is outgrowing its own skin, aching to shed, to emerge as something comprehensible, tangible, governable. Just as it always has, and, Sorav has come to realize, always will.

He observes the topography of the city from the highest tower of the Palas. The streets, like the years, blur into a hazy patchwork of green and gold, but he can still make out fragments of clarity: the boulevards where he picked off the last of the Marshal Exultant's loyalists, the Opera, the Sanitarium, the cloudy wasteland neighborhoods, infected wounds from the Revival he has no desire to reclaim, no matter how loudly the Laurel Chancellor may bitch about eyesores.

Something is amiss. He can't smell it like Aster, nor hear it like Olaf, but he can still feel it, even from a dozen stories up. It seeps through his bones like an ache, through every scar he does not have, every death he hasn't died. It is a feeling that has not touched him since the Revival, when the streets were filled with raw ecdytoxin. Deforming, destabilizing, rearranging its surroundings the same way poison might rearrange a victim's tissue, misfolding membranes, stoppering channels, clinging and cleaving. *Enzymatic,* Reames had once told him. *Metabolic.*

His hand is already on the earpiece when the phone rings. He lifts it, expecting to hear a report of a skirmish, or of Florian's violent excesses, but the voice is not his protégé's, nor that of the officer sent to tail him. Elspeth Schölin, frantic, incoherent, shouts something into the receiver; the phone then passes to a Crypsis bodyguard, then an usher, then a Crypsis bodyguard disguised as an usher, and then, finally, to the Chancellor himself. Information arrives in random order of importance: the theater is in chaos, someone is hurt, the orgy scene is ruined—absolutely *ruined,* Max.

"I'm telling you," says the Chancellor. "Biggest turnoff I've ever seen. Also, I think someone tried to kill me."

Sorav blinks. "Eir Chancellor?"

"They missed. Some sort of—bite, I think. Something crawled up my sleeve. Slithered right through my perfume—who knows what else is crawling around here—"

"Are you sure?"

"Scents are *useless.* I'm a sitting duck right now."

"Eir—"

"I refuse to die in a theater, Maximian. It's been done too many times. Send the fucking Guard. I've only got so many Crypsis agents and half of them are in the cast."

Even attenuated through the static of ionized sap, the perfumed words of Sorav's superior compel him. "Yes, Eir Chancellor," he says, and hangs up.

He taps his finger against his lip. He's faced plenty of his own assassins, but no one has yet made an attempt on the Laurel Chancellor. No one has escaped the snare of his ecdytoxin enough to try. Overcome by his cloud of perfume, a swordsman will sheathe his saber, a poisoner will dump the tainted wine. A sniper looking down her barrel will see only the city's beloved curator, and her aim will be blurred by tearful awe. No, all Tiliard's violent political impulses, its ugliness and human waste, are funneled through the Grand Marshal. "The BGS complaints department," Florian calls him, when he insists on being particularly awful.

An accident, perhaps. The bite of a random insect, or some sort of perfume mishap, necessitating nothing but a firing squad and a short cleanup. Maximian knows better than to hope. The front lines had taught him that optimism is often fatal. It's all that looking forward to the future, his old sergeant used to say. You don't see the present blazing in from the flank.

He could walk down there now. He could walk to Conundrum wearing nothing but his housecoat and bone-studded headdress. He could run the bloodbath, burn the theater to the ground and bathe in the heat and smoke, the sting of alchemic vitriols, the pressure of a bullet. He could feel that red curtain fall over him, as Olaf puts it, and still rise to bask in the

applause.

But his old wounds are aching today. He doesn't dress, doesn't rush down to his master's side like a young, eager dog. He only places a call to the Tender Guard reserves, slips a summons for his perfumer down the pneumatic chute, and pours himself a drink.

★ ★ ★

Aster is seven years old. She's glued to the window, transfixed by the smoke sputtering from the taxi's hood stack. The metabolic engine moans as the cabbie reassures his passengers that yes, that sound is normal, and yes, this is the safest route right now.

Her parents sit beside her, exuding the fragrances of their trade. Her mother carries the somber essence of the black bastion rose, her father the scent of coronation ivy. Though they have no pomanders or nosegays with them, having delivered them to some event Aster can't quite recall—a vigil, a funeral, a meeting that necessitated a uniformed stranger pinching her cheek—the cab will smell of floristry and Fauniche perfume for days to come.

"Spiritual advertising," her mother calls it.

There's a military blockade on Petunia, so the driver turns onto the ring of Nineteenth Street, hoping for better luck with the circumferential. He is telling Aster's parents about who he's lost in the past month, and worse, who he's found: a friend crushed under a fallen building, his landlord strangled in the tails of a hellrat king, an acquaintance running from a gang of Palas soldiers, swollen tongue unfurling from his mouth like a fern.

Then he slams on the brakes. The cab heaves forward, then back—something thumps against it, followed by a muffled shout and a kick to the rumbling hood. The driver rolls down the window, gestures obscenely, then rolls it up again.

"Fucking Borisch shithead," he grunts, then resumes his stories of taxis overturned, limousines raided, carriages stopped and everyone, including the horses, undergoing torturous interrogation.

They continue past the dancing lights of the blockade, past the stench of conflict between the Palas Infantry and the guerrilla front that will one day become the Tender Guard. The moonset glows a dappled purple as the cab turns, compass-chimes ringing.

Maybe it's the way she angles herself across her mother's lap that saves her. Maybe it's the way her body is positioned when the impact comes, or the whim of the moon's gravity. Years later, the Chancellor will say those who survived the battles of the Revival did so because they were marked for greatness, because they could, consciously or not, spin beauty from strife; they, like the toxin that contaminated them, could reshape Tiliard in the most wondrous ways. The Marshal will contradict him, telling her that no one survived the Revival, not even himself. It is only taking some casualties longer to die than others.

They are well past the blockade when the cab swerves again. This time, the driver is utterly silent—he brakes, turns pale, then puts the vehicle in reverse. Shouts follow, then the pop of what Aster will come to recognize as ecdytoxin grenades. A yellow cloud bursts against the slope of the windshield, while metal canisters streak through the gas, leaving open seams of naked sky in their wake.

The cab veers, rocking over the curb with a shriek. The seats lurch, and the driver switches gears, but the transmission lever splits under his glove. Metal screeches as the chassis peels apart. The seats bloat and rip open. The windows shatter, and a swell of foaming gas pours into the cabin, thick as water and oiled with a silvery sheen. Aster rolls with the current, gasping, her mother's fist closed around her collar, knuckles against her cheek.

"Hold your breath—" she hears her father rasp. It's his last command, and the last one she will, as usual, disregard.

The toxin pours down her throat. It tastes surprisingly sweet, like the compounds she feeds to the carnivorous bouquets. It slithers through her trachea with an almost pleasant heat, and takes root in her bronchial tree, though she will not know this until later, when her first productive cough in the Sanitarium leaves a snake of squirming tissue in her hand.

She can't cry out, she can only grope for something solid, for loose sleeves or strands of hair as the car and its occupants fatally unfurl. The world deforms like a dream; the street boils, cobblestones pop and bubble, and the taxi begins to sink.

A hand materializes from the cloud of dusted glass, wrapping around her wrist. As she wriggles up through the broken window, she sheds the memory and her smaller skin, crawling fully grown from the disintegrating cab and into Mallory's arms.

She coughs, bleary-eyed, stumbling against him as he leads her down an alley.

"You're all right," Mallory says, pulling his handkerchief from her purse. "Put this to your mouth. Breathe, vralen. Not too fast."

As she blinks away her tears, she makes out the shadows of other bodies, hurriedly trotting in the same direction. Behind them, bells ring out from the Palas towers. "What happened—" she starts.

"Tender Guard," Mallory rasps. "They're clearing the streets."

Air struggles into her lungs, sluggish, burning. She recognizes her own work, a foul perfume of galvanic honeydew and

pepperberry, with enough ecdytoxin to peel off a thin layer of its victims' skins. As Mallory drags her down the alley, sharing the handkerchief between them, she curses the perfection with which she formulates the Marshal's fumes, both in maximum and miniature.

"We need—far—" she wheezes through the fumigants. "We need to go—"

"I know." The bell of a streetcar approaches from behind, and Mallory grabs her about the waist. "Rebirth far enough?"

She gasps as her feet are pulled from the cobblestones. He jumps up the steps of the last car and heaves her through the door. They push through the uneasy crowd, and collapse together on a velvet seat at the car's end. The other passengers are equally shaken, and for once, when Aster leans down between her knees to hack up a lung, she is not alone.

"You all right?" Mallory asks. "You were … not there for a second."

"Only … galvanic," she answers. "Honeydew. Memory. It fucks with memory."

"What happened?" someone asks from another seat, pressing her nose against the back window. The car jerks in belches of purple smoke, hesitating at every turn.

"Something at the Opera," suggests a man with broken glasses. "A fire."

"Someone's not happy with the ending of *The Lilies,*" says another.

"An attack," sighs a third. "It's that season again. Better pick a side now."

The other occupants laugh nervously, but Aster only groans.

"Elspeth," she mutters.

"She'll be all right," Mallory says. "Just breathe."

He lays a hand on her back and she blinks up at him. Her tears have dislodged a set of her false eyelashes, which now perch on the bridge of his nose. Behind his head, haloed in crystalline spall, the fragmented moon eases toward the cityscape.

Aster lowers her eyes, staring at the mess she's made of his handkerchief. Its colors have dulled, its threads frayed. His initials, serif by serif, are coming loose. "I'm sorry. I ruined it."

"Vralen, it's fine." He seems nothing less than pleased. "Some things are made to unravel."

★ ★ ★

Guy lies on a leather bed in Borisch & Sons' undercity infirmary, blanketed in narcosis. Voices and bodies move around him. He is restrained, then released, then sprayed with stinging disinfectant; he struggles and is tranquilized. For hours, he drifts in and out of consciousness, uncertain he is alive but beyond sure he is fired.

News trickles in from above, droplets of signal in a deluge of noise. From his nook in the infirmary, he can gather from hearsay an estimation of casualties, of consequences, of costs. Eir Boris XII is on the telephone with the Bureau of Sanitation, who is on the phone with the Grand Marshal. Though the details are hazy, it's clear enough that the Sreckt Brothers are pointing their fingers at Borisch & Sons, Borisch is pointing theirs at a rogue operative from Sanitation, and Three is pointing hers, more or less, at Guy.

"I *specifically* remember telling you not to break anything," she says, pacing the row of cots as Dr. Nic prods him for injuries. She's one-armed again, having caught the other under the rolling Sreckt lorry (and her *good* one, she emphasizes by waving her oaken stump in Guy's face). "Numbers are still coming in. Some sod from Finance has already gone mad trying to quantify the mess. Thirty million marks' worth of structural damage. Countless, *priceless* works. Or worthless. We'll never know—and that's the real tragedy, they say."

Guy cradles his pounding head. Failed by both memory and comprehension, he can muster no explanation. *I didn't mean to* seems at once the worst and only correct response.

"Where's Dawn—" he moans instead, before Dr. Nic pries open his mouth. Her gloves are stained from a recent surgery, and Guy doesn't know if it's the smell of the rubber or the blood on them that sickens him more.

"*Dawn!*" Three spits. "The next time you see that man, you get on your knees and kiss his feet. Carried you out of there like a bride to the altar. Fucking *disastrophe,* Guylag. The whole place is in chaos. Grand Marshal took the affront to his statue personally. What did you *do*?"

"Where's Dawn?" he repeats as soon as Nic removes her hands from his mouth. "Is he okay?"

"Okayer than you. He's at headquarters taking the heat. Quality Improvement is probably trying to beat something intelligible out of him."

"You'll live," Nic says, disappointed she can find no injury to fix (or worsen).

"Don't get comfortable, Moulène," Three continues. "They're coming for you next. Management still doesn't know what charges'll be brought against us. Negligence, vandalism, *treason*—" She turns on her heel and kicks the next bed. "The whole place is still peeling apart. It's *malignant.* No one has *any* idea how we'd begin to clean up—or how we're gonna catch those things that crawled outta that fucking mess." She shoves the table next to his bed and kneels in its place, finding the best angle

to cut him with her glare. “Tell me what you did. I can’t talk our way out of this if you don’t give me something to talk about.”

“I tried to kill it,” he says quietly.

“Kill what?”

“That thing. The same thing—as Abrupt Ends.”

“Your dragon.”

“I couldn’t—it just—” The word *bred* hangs unsaid in his mouth. It seems both insufficient and too ominous. “It molted.”

“*Molted.*” Three starts pacing again. She buzzes to herself for a while, muttering about leaks in gas lines, explosive reactions between fumigants and volatile pigments, the instability of the ancient power grids that germinate from the midcity. “God. The mess it left behind. No bug could do that. This was something else entirely.”

“Three.”

“Must have been the wiring. Ancient, the kind that breaks all alchemical laws. Real arcane shit.”

“Three.”

“What?”

“Ninety-eight.”

“*Fine.* It was three ninety-eight. You think I don’t *know* that?” She folds her arm and a half. “A new breed of termite with a new breed of toxin—sure. Borisch & Sons has been dealing with that shit for hundreds of years. It doesn’t pull *us* out of the frying pan. Only proves we left a job unfinished.” She dismisses his pleading look. “You’re trying to give me an explanation when I need an excuse. Don’t say anything about Abrupt Ends. Hell, don’t say anything about Conundrum. We had no idea. Never saw any bugs. Fired no canisters. And we definitely didn’t break out any phlogiston.”

“Three, it killed that Srecktman.”

“*Good.* Teach him to fuck with our call. Far as we know, this is his fault. You stayed right by me, in the lorry.”

“Don’t think we’ll get away with that,” Guy says miserably.

“Oh, fuck *off*! You spend your entire life lying through your teeth and now you go straight? Look, if Sreckt pins this on us, they’re gonna feed me to the tulips. Dawn might get out, being legally dead and all, but you—best case, the Twelfth will sell your contract to some broker in Strangleroot and you’ll be working off the damage till the moon rises whole.”

His stomach turns. “Tyro—”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “*Tyro.* What to do with that one?”

“I can’t do it,” Guy mutters. “Been through four names, four roots already. I can’t go back there. Can’t take her to the beggars’ troughs again.”

“No, you can’t.” Three’s voice softens. “Call someone. Send her to Orphanwell before this gets messier.”

“No,” he croaks.

“Textile Crack, then. Fresh beds there. And they’re always looking for small fingers.”

“No.”

“Then what? You’re gonna try to run away? All the way to the countryside?”

Guy drives the heels of his palms into his eyes, commanding himself not to cry. His head throbs, spinning like the wheels and blades of the meatpacking plants. He can still smell the misted blood.

“I need the phone,” he says eventually.

“You got change?”

“You think I’ve got change?” he snaps.

“Fine. Pay it back.” She stands. “You still owe me a favor, so do me this one: Don’t make a break for it. I mean it. You’ll get yourself killed, and Quality Improvement will be furious if you die before they see you hanged.”

★ ★ ★

The south end of Rebirth, like many other zones ravaged by Revivalist warfare, is a jungle of hazards. Most of the streetlamps have blown out, and those that remain bleed the barest of light. The pavement has been reduced to silver gravel, lily-padded by the open mouths of some monstrous sort of fly trap, a species that Aster can’t recognize but probably lies somewhere in the middle of the *Borisch Manual,* among the deluge of pests that emerged during the Revival.

Deformed corpses of restaurants and shops lie strewn across intersections. Occasionally an intact wall or walkway or perfectly set living room will jut from the rubble, survivors of the battle or the neighborhood’s spontaneous attempts to regrow from it. The whole avenue is a dizzying, unnavigable mess, and a surprisingly pleasant one.

“The air is so clear here,” Aster says, woozy with adrenaline or drink. She follows Mallory over a fallen column, between trellises of wrought iron, and into a little courtyard. A canopy of fanned leaves and mushroom caps shields the grove from the street. By the time they reach the ruins of the porch, the only noise Aster can make out is the chirping of some nearby bugs and

the serene splash of broken plumbing.

The place has no front door, but the slab of glassy amber that's dripped down in its place seems a suitable replacement. Mallory shoves it aside, leading Aster into the blasted husk of the foyer.

The lamps flicker to life, illuminating a house haunted by a ghost of luxury. Marble twists in cracked arabesques across the floor, from the door to the broad stairway. Gold leaf trembles through the air like shed autumn foliage. The opalescent tracks of a Whittleston infestation streak along the oak rafters, lending a lustrous hue to the dust. Something that may have once been a musical instrument slouches in the corner, a stringy black shrub sprouting from its innards.

"I would've swept," Mallory says, "had I known I'd have a guest."

"It's … quaint," Aster replies, as a silverfish the size of a kitten scurries past her feet. *One man's pest is another's pleasure,* she reminds herself.

"It's much better upstairs," Mallory says. "It's still got running water, and it's always the right temperature." He guides her up the stairs to a series of melted suites. The east walls have been blown out, replaced by partitions of rhododendrons and broken glass.

"I don't suppose there's a phone," she says.

"I've got a thing that used to be one." He gestures to a wire-bound cluster of brass grapes. "Wouldn't recommend picking it up. It leaks."

She releases an exhausted laugh. Maybe it's better not to inform the Palas of her whereabouts. Florian will sniff her out anyway, if not with his nose, with his interrogations.

"Do you at least have a … Can I freshen up somewhere?"

"Bath is over there. I'll get you a housecoat." Mallory moves to a recess in the wall, formerly a closet, and she collapses on a nearby chaise.

"Well, you came at a ripe time," she sighs. The top notes of her perfume have decayed, leaving only the clinging scent of Tender Guard fumigants. Somehow, she feels both naked and cloaked in filth. "I suppose we were due for a coup."

"Vralen?"

"Every fifteen, twenty years we go through some crisis or another. Once when I was a child, once when my parents were, once when their parents were."

"My father fled Tiliard during the last one," Mallory says. "He never talked about it."

"Wise of him."

Mallory guts the closet, pushing aside an emerald suit, a riding cloak, a ball gown. Finally, he pulls out a silk robe, deep crimson and in as poor taste as everything else. "Sorry, it'll be loose. He wasn't a small man."

"I'm surprised any of these fit you."

"They don't. But I can handle a needle." Mallory offers the bathrobe, hooded and encircled by a monk's golden cord.

"Is this—Mal, is this a costume?" she asks.

"Bath is that way," he replies.

Aster bundles the robe and makes her way down the hall, where she finds what was once a marble washroom. A few walls are missing, replaced by foliage. Two columns gesture vaguely toward what is left of the ceiling, stone dripping like candlewax down their sides. A smooth depression, carved less by human intention than by ballistic impact, serves as the tub.

Mallory is right about the water. It emerges clear and warm from the faucet, and Aster doesn't wait for the basin to fill before she crawls into it. As the suds rise around her, as the grime and perfume and pepperberry drain from her skin, so does her panic. She sinks into the steam, still uncomfortably drunk, and gazes between the melted fragments of ceiling.

The sky pinkens. She shivers in the heat, trying not to think of what may be transpiring on Conundrum. Maybe fallout from the ending of *The Lilies.* Maybe something worse. Something violent, if the Marshal is dispatching the Tender Guard. He breaks out the galvanic honeydew only when he needs to clear out a large area, to force entire crowds to lose their bodies, their minds, to revert to helpless childhood, succumbing instantly to the stupor of resurgent memory.

She rises from the bath and reaches for her clutch. She applies her medicinal spray to her throat, then a defensive scent, a sleepy pheromone that calms both wearer and observer. She throws on the robe and takes her time returning to the bedroom, examining Mallory's sink, his emerald razor, his goat-leather strop, exploring the nooks and crannies of the upper floor. The house carries the remnants of a life richly lived. Bookshelves stand fused to their contents, spilling bouquets of yellowed pages from leather stems. On a cobwebbed vanity, a row of Fauniche perfumes gathers dust. The scents have long since decayed, but Aster picks one up and loosens its lid. It stinks of nothingness—almost overwhelming, like a sudden silence to a noise-adjusted ear.

She returns to the bedroom to find the bed made, and unoccupied. Mallory lies on the chaise by the viny fireplace, jacket bunched under his head. Exhaustion, or alcohol, has done its work on him; his hands are folded over his stomach, his mouth open in the unrousable gape of the wasted. Aster knows she should take this chance to flee, to run back into whatever crisis

may be unfolding on Conundrum, to watch the Opera burn or witness another insurrectionary assail the Judicial Palas, just as the Marshal Revenant had, and the Marshal Exultant before him, a ritual of succession dating back to the first merchant-kings. She could watch the carnage unfold, watch Sorav aim his crosshairs at some upstart's heart, ensuring the skull stayed intact for his next headdress.

Or she could rest. Briefly, she could step outside that ugly circle and let the machinations of Tiliard tick into place around her. For a night, she could forget about her work, about the Marshal's demands, her sickly breath, forget as much as Sorav does in the throes of mayfly.

A streak of morning sun passes over Mallory's hands. Gloveless, Aster sees for the first time the punctate scars covering his fingers, his knuckles, his wrists. Carefully, she brushes a thumb across them, until she reaches his shirtsleeve. Under the silk cuff, she spies a wayward shadow. She hesitates, a cold flutter in her heart, then folds back his sleeve.

An ink band circles his skin. Its details have blurred; the mark is old, the color faded, but between two thin black bars, she spies a familiar insignia. A trick of the eye, she thinks at first—hallucinations, says Surgeon General Whyck, are common in survivors of ecdytoxic attacks. But the effects have not touched Aster's mind nearly so much as her lungs. She knows her company's stamp when she sees it.

Not a country boy, then, but an undercity one. Not an heir from Dagdrun, nor a patron of the arts, nor a reformed Mongfestun graduate. Nothing but a prolific liar, a pest crawled up from the undercity to infest whatever ruin suited him most, weaving some story about a rich father from the threads he found in the closet.

She wants to enrage herself, to puff up with indignation. She knows she should shake him awake, demand to see the rest of his arm, to witness the record of his debts, the deed to this property, proof that he is in any way the gentleman he has presented to her. Instead, careful not to rouse him, she raises his hand and breathes in his scent, dark and natural and chaotic, the scent of a man hiding everything but his odor.

"Who are you, vant Passand?" she whispers, and kisses his knuckle. Then she sets his hand down, turns to the bed, and crawls inside.

She intends to stay awake for a while, to think, to worry, to adjust the bedside radio for updates. But even before she hits the pillow, she is drifting downward, past the soft scurrying of bristletails and blast mice in the floors, and into the void of sleep.

STRANGLEROOT TARANTELLA

The Root Upward, so named by charitable trusts in the overcity, is better known as Strangleroot—not for the foul-smelling vines that cling to every surface, nor its frequent hangings (intentional and accidental), but for the unbreakable grip it has over those who set foot on it. A pet project of the Poverty Mitigation Society, the root is sticky with philanthropic runoff. Beggars' troughs and workhouses line the passages, exuding sap and Palas recruitment handbills. Its tunnels are netted with mycorrhiza, its bridges splintered, its docks crowded with ticketless passengers. Those that get out, via employment contract, military service, or guile, inevitably find themselves dragged back, in a day or a decade. The more time spent on the root, the stronger its hold. Some insolvents trapped deep in its meat, where the highest floors of the abattoirs meet the lowest cells of the Palas prisons, have not seen the sun in decades.

Guy won't go back. He won't perform the debtor's dance, flitting from forger to tattooist to alchemist, begging for a change of name, of birth, of height or face or sex or work history. He won't scrape the honeydew off his boots to crawl into a different bunk every night, lying wakeful as strange bodies rustle around him, weeping, groping, trying to sell a broken pistol or a vial of mad honey to a neighbor. He won't stand at the slaughterhouse gates and wait for news of the latest accident or union massacre to free up some contracts.

Tyro can't go back either. Not at her age. There are few ways for a child to escape that place, and each is uglier than the last.

Don't make a break for it, Three repeats in his head.

She should know him better than that. If she gives him change and expects him not to gamble it, she's a bigger fool than he is.

He sneaks out of the infirmary as soon as he can manage it, sidling along the wall to the company phone booth. The nook is empty. The ungodly hour has spared him the queue of the usual suspects: Margot, who bellows drunken threats to her boyfriend; Bell, who cries to her father; or Rickhardt, who mutters into the mouthpiece with some surreptitious lover, arm pumping to the words on the other side.

Crammed into the nook between the lavatories and the infirmary, Guy fingers his change. True to her miserly good sense, Three has left him only enough for a single call. A single call for myriad problems, and it won't be to Orphanwell.

He lifts the mouthpiece and demands to be put through to the Bishop of the Last Monday.

"It's an emergency," he says. "I'm his son."

The operator hesitates to transfer a call from the undercity, especially at this hour, but Guy's lie is just bold enough to force cooperation. The line goes silent, redirecting its flow of ionized sugars, and a brusque voice answers on the other side. It's the porter.

"Get me Davide," Guy says. "I need to talk to him."

"Who is this?"

"His exterminator."

"Who?" A bustle muddies his voice—a pluck of a harpsichord, a peal of laughter.

"You know who this is," Guy says.

"I'm afraid I don't."

He grits his teeth, every second a coin lost. "From Borisch. Put him on. It's about the silverfish."

"I don't know anything about silverfish." The line muffles. "I'm sorry, the master is asleep."

"It's an emergency," Guy says. "Just put him on. I need some—" He pauses, unsure if he intends to ask for money, a lawyer, a ticket out of town, lodging for Tyro, or all of it. "I need—"

"Goodbye, eir."

"Just a place to—"

"Have a lovely night."

"*Fuck,*" Guy hisses as the line dissolves into static. He bites the inside of his cheek, sorting through his options. If he runs, he won't get two roots over before they find him and fire him, tackle him to the ground and feed the black needle-tape around his arm, snapping it tight in a burst of pain. He has even less of a chance at the docks, where any smuggler who sees his bands will know he's cargo not worth the risk.

"Who were you calling?"

He jumps, wheeling to see Dawn standing in the gnarled archway. He's in his civilian tunic, unharmed but with a dazed, haggard look, like a boxer after a flurry of blows.

"Are you okay?" Guy breathes. "Where's Three?"

"Who were you calling?" Dawn repeats.

"Orphanwell."

His bunkmate sighs.

"I was."

Dawn looks at his feet. Though he fills the nook tightly enough to hunch, he seems small. "You were begging."

Guy hangs the earpiece and stares at him. "What did they do to you?" he whispers.

"You don't have to beg, Guylag." The calm in his voice is unsettling. He looks to the slit of sunrise beyond the nook's entrance, where two shadows linger. "They want to talk to you. I assume Three told you to deny everything."

"You know her."

"I would recommend against that."

Guy glances to the uniformed men waiting at the other end of the platform. Not Borisch security, or dressed in the crisp black of the Palas. "What's happening? Are we fucked? Dawn, are we fired?"

Dawn offers his elbow. "I'll walk you to the elevator."

Guy takes his arm, his sleeve starched and ironed, as if he has just returned from a wedding rather than an interrogation.

"I can't tell if they questioned you or gave you a ribbon," Guy mutters.

A crack appears in Dawn's marble frown. "No ribbons."

"Thank God." As they walk, Guy tries to shrug off the gazes of the men following them. "You remember what happened last time."

"You better than me."

"Of course. You were still conked on laudanum. Sulking in that coffin they gave you." He attempts to smile, to dress his doomed march as a casual stroll. "Can't blame you, with the League of Mourners out on the docks. All lined up, singing for you."

"What was that godawful song…"

"'Lament for a Lost Soldier.' And the worst version, too."

"Even in Ostlerfell I'd never met a group of people so eager for me to die."

"And your face when you saw them," Guy whispers, glancing over his shoulder as they approach the bridge to the elevator. "I should dig up an old copy of the *Lunar Herald* with that picture of you."

"If you do," Dawn says, before pushing Guy over to the care of the operator, "I'll recite your old poems to Tyro."

Dawn has always resented that photograph. Nineteen and fresh from Ostlerfell, in it he stands at the crest of the gangplank of the hospital ship, dumbfounded, encased in a crisp uniform instead of a body bag. A great insult to the Grand Marshal, whose firstborn had been caught in the same ambush at Broken Horse. With two injuries and one surgeon between them, only by dint of mislabeled paperwork was Dawn wheeled under the knife instead of the commanding officer for whom he had sworn to die.

His unexpected survival was a similarly surprising blow to the League of Mourners, who had already printed his name on their pamphlets, carved it into memorial plaques, and incorporated it into their rendition of the "Lament." For a hero of the Autotomic Brigade, the celebrated sacrificial limb, to crawl back to the corps alive—it was in dreadfully poor taste.

By the time Corporal Flint descended that plank, the Grand Marshal was arranging his exile and the League his funeral. Honors not already tattooed on him were stripped. His compensation was repossessed, his contract voided, his name struck from the roster of the living. The only one indifferent to the horrendous event of his non-passing had been the handsome lunar priest hired to say his rites.

"Oh dear," the cleric laughed, walking into the cabin to discover not one dead man, but two living ones, sitting with legs draped over the side of the coffin and passing a stick of tobacco between them. "Well, might as well lie back and pretend. Let me say a few words so I won't have wasted the trip down. Nothing wrong with a little theater, is there?"

★ ★ ★

The sun rises over the Opera in a haze of confused violence. The Chancellor is whisked to safety, concealed in a blanket of gaseous weaponry. Rumors abound of an assassination attempt, of an arson, of a deluge of giant insects—all disseminated well before the morning poems are printed. A panicked invocation of the Conundrum Incident is passed from mouth to ink to music, and the vague nightmare of Tiliard's collective memory snaps suddenly awake.

Before the events at the Opera are even elucidated, a slew of culprits are invoked: terrorists, seditionists, a small, nascent artistic movement known as the Extemporists. The rear guard of the previous régime attempts to take credit, announcing the

resurgence of Neo-Repressionism. The cast of *The Lilies Wretched,* still in their leotards, and the cast of *A House Call,* still in their negligée, are captured and interrogated. Even Florian Crickshaw, the little Impaler of the Tender Guard, makes an appearance late in the night, cloaked in marksman's perfume as he picks off fleeing revelers from a nearby clock tower.

By the next afternoon, eight people are killed, sixty arrested, and Aster wakes alone at half past four, leaden and hungover but otherwise unharmed. Birdsong drifts through the halls of rhododendrons and splintered furniture. She rises, head aching.

A kettle whistles somewhere below. She adjusts her robe, buttoning her monk's brooch, and makes her way down the stairs. Shadows skitter out of her way as she traverses the foyer and enters the ruins of a kitchen.

Mallory doesn't notice her approach. He sings, not badly, to the Aufhocker ballad playing on the radio. A large beetle simmers in a pan nearby.

"What's going on outside?" she asks.

He jumps, then smiles over his shoulder. "No one seems sure. An assassination attempt of some sort. A Tender Guard lorry came down the next street over, screeching orders to stay inside."

"They didn't stop by?"

He pops open a jar of confiture. "No. Expecting a ride?"

"Sooner or later."

"Right. Want some grease-beetle?" As Mallory pulls open a drawer and removes a knife, Aster watches the faded band appear from under his sleeve. He doesn't carry himself like a Tiliarder, and his accent is better than any fake she could conjure from cricket-wing and Dagdrun black plum. Then again, he fries his grease-beetle just like they do in the undercity, in the shell and with legs still attached.

"Your dad teach you to cook a beetle?" she asks.

"God, no. He was a wealthy man. Much fonder of pheasant."

"And it's not something you learn in military academy, I take it."

He removes the bug from the frying pan. "No. Though in the leaner months we could scrounge up a decent rat casserole. Dee's was especially good."

Aster smiles, narrows her eyes. "You learn embroidery in Mongfestun, too?"

"They taught us all the manly arts. A little swordplay, a little sewing."

"So when are you going to get to the part where you worked in the undercity?"

She expects him to freeze, to raise his hackles, to give her, at least, some sort of look. He only sets out some bread on the table. "Sure. I'm not entirely the stranger come to town. More of a prodigal son."

"So, who did you work for? What did you do?"

"I was—well, you could say I was an exterminator. Brief career. I left during the Revival."

Aster watches him smear his beetle over a slice of bread. He had to have been so young then, within spitting distance of childhood—a foolish kid looking for a cause, a rebellious son of a rich man, an orphan desperate for the easy money. "Mal," she starts. "Is this really your father's house?"

"Yes—well, he … wasn't really my father. More of a spiritual one. I was a bit of a … foundling."

"A bit of a foundling." Aster laughs. "I assumed he pulled you from the Catoptric, fully formed, like the wizard in *Fleeting Lodestar*?"

He shrugs. "Close enough."

"And is vant Passand your real name?"

"As far as I've been told."

He hands her a piece of bread, and she looks it over. "Why are you here, really?"

"I told you. Loose threads."

"Answer me, Mallory."

His pause is dark. When he speaks again, Aster dares to think she's whittled him down to the truth. "I lost someone. Someone I loved. During the Revival."

There we go. "Oh, Mal." She deflates. "That's a familiar story. We all lost someone. To BGS, or the Marshal Exultant, or just bad luck. Whoever was spared by one side was killed by the other. There's no use bearing a grudge over them."

"They're not dead, vralen. Just badly misplaced."

"Well—" She hesitates. She can't bring herself to tell him the only thing worse than losing someone to those clouds of ecdytoxin is finding them again—especially years later, when their petrified remains have more or less grown into the backdrop of Tiliarder statuary. At least, she thinks guiltily, his chances of success are mercifully dim. "Well. If I can help…"

"Appreciated, vralen. Oh—before I forget." He sets down his bread and pulls his handkerchief from his pocket. "I washed it. I figured you needed it more than I do. It'll hold until I make you a new one."

Her heart turns as he lays the cloth in her hand. "What about Demetrius?"

"What about him?"

"He was wearing your embroidery. Right at his throat."

"You could tell? From that distance?"

"It's got very striking patterns. A unique—" Before she can finish, a resounding crack jolts through the room. A shout echoes from the portico. Aster curses, pulls her robe tighter and trots to the foyer. The slab of amber shakes as a boot pounds it from the other side. She recognizes the rhythm of the kicks, the hoarse grunts of the silhouette behind the door.

"Is that your ride?" Mallory asks. "Should I open it for him?"

"Absolutely not," Aster says. "Let him figure it out."

The shadows hunch beyond the doorway, then disappear. A pin clicks, and an acrid cloud hisses through the cracks. The amber melts into sap, pooling in a slumped pile under the doorway.

Seven men step into the room—or six men and a boy dressed as one. Florian marches at the front of his Tender Guard unit, preceded by his perfume; too tall in his stark white uniform, his jaw darkened as if he has shaved something that morning—but still, despite Aster's best efforts, unbearded.

"You must be Florian," Mallory says.

"What the fuck is this, Aster?" His eyes move across the rotting foyer, from the cobwebs to the stairs to Mallory. "Who is this?"

"He's … a friend," she answers. "From out of town."

"Quite the lodgings." Florian's hand crosses to his hilt.

"Don't," Aster starts, but he draws anyway. His blade bends the light, shimmering as he points the tip toward Mal's head, then his hands, as if calculating the best position to pin him up in his Palas display case. A smile crosses his face when Mallory tenses, tapping the bread knife against his thumb.

"Don't do it, Mal," Aster growls. "Don't let him goad you into a fight."

"Of course not, vralen," Mallory says. "If I did, who would drive you home?"

Florian's eyes widen—with rage, or pleasure, or both. She recognizes his look; he is envisioning wings of splayed skin, trinkets of bone, little tokens of Mallory he might send to Elspeth in a sad attempt to woo her.

"Is El okay?" Aster asks quickly.

Florian softens at the name. He stares at his opponent a moment longer, then sheathes his blade. "She's fine. Shaken up. Worried about you."

"I should go, then." Aster turns and offers Mallory a trembling hand. *Don't fucking kiss it. Hold it like a friend.* "Eir vant Passand."

Obediently, he gives her fingers a platonic squeeze. "Vralen Vost. Please visit when you can." His eyes flit to the melted amber. "As you can see, my door's open."

"I'll see you again," she says, and she hopes it sounds, at least vaguely, like a credible threat. "Good luck with your loose threads, Eir Mallory."

"Thank you. Truly, vralen. You've already brought me more luck than I could ask for."

★ ★ ★

Borisch & Sons' offices, like those of Sreckt and Metaldrip Defense Industries and other entities whose business brings them frequently between the roots and Tiliard's stump-face, span the height of the city. Not a skyscraper so much as the hollow imprint of one, the headquarters is reclaimed from the ancient shafts stretching from the base of Joyous Healing all the way to Fifth Street. Elevator cars rattle along its tubules, harlequined in glass and large enough to accommodate several ballistae in the event of an apocalyptic infestation—or, in the rare event of a Boris visiting the barracks, a buffet big enough to amuse him on the way down.

Guy leans against the glass, watching the hollow landscape of the midcity. Manufactories spill sludge from huge wooden pipes, piles of ancient machinery decay under blankets of albino vines. His foul breath steams his reflection, blurring his stubble and grimy jacket, the exhausted purple ringing his honey-brown eyes.

The elevator deposits him at overcity headquarters. He traverses the atrium just as morning burns the dew from the windows. He feels upside-down under the chandeliers and arching skylights, too used to his light radiating from below, reflected in silver water.

Out of the hundreds of floors of company headquarters, a dozen are occupied, and only three of these are aboveground. What they lack in number they make up for in height. Built during the company's glory days, the halls are carved with *Manual* entries, from erosion roaches to Bacher's dragonfly. Guy climbs past ubiquitous pests and extinct species of mythical size, past the Mammoth Stag and the Old Bailey Worm. At the end of the highest hall, where the spear of Boris III pierces the Worm's

abdomen, stands the president's door.

Guy hesitates at the threshold. He swallows, condemned to fall into this trap, whatever it is—firing, imprisonment, Dr. Nic with her utensils, ready to remove his thumbs to ensure he'll never find honest work again.

He takes a deep breath, and for the first time in his career, enters Eir Borisch's office. A jungle of leather and wood yawns over him. Wide-leafed plants spill from golden pots, and a large window gazes out onto Fifth. A dozen portraits line the west wall, the largest of which depicts Boris I, buck's antler in one fist and hunting rifle in the other. Framed next to him is his nearly identical son, and then his slightly less identical grandson and great-grandson—a pure, uninterrupted patrilineage of Boris Borisches stretching over three centuries of business.

The man who greets Guy is not the man who occupies the newest portrait. He is sleeker and darker, sporting a goatee that seems more at home in a men's magazine than on a real face. Guy supposes he is a cousin of some sort, a black sheep herded toward the unsavory tasks thought beneath the main Borisch flock.

"They're drab, aren't they?" the man says, nodding at the paintings. "For being so committed to portraiture you'd think they'd have better taste."

Guy's voice is nothing but a rasp. "Are you not…"

"One of them? No, thank God. Though we have our similarities. While their line is all sons, ours is somehow comprised entirely of nephews." His laugh is softer than Guy expects. "At the very least, we've all got our own names." He extends his hand. "Bertram."

Guy takes it, trying to sort this man into his managerial taxonomy. Not thuggish enough for security, not earnest enough for Quality Improvement. Some species of lawyer, or a debt agent. "Guylag," he says.

"Ah—as in *Saint Guylag and the Dragon*?"

He blinks. "Yes."

"A classic. Haven't seen that one since I was a boy." When Guy attempts to reclaim his hand, he tightens his grip. His smile is white, and his ascot is Ostlerfell Blue. "That's an old tragedy. From well before the world began. Is that your thumb name?"

Guy doesn't answer. Bertram must know that to ask such a thing of a debtor is at best an intimacy, at worst an insult.

"I'm kidding," Bertram says, releasing his grip. "A beautiful name, Guylag. Up top we put a lot of stock into that sort of thing. A few pretty syllables will earn a man much more than he deserves. And Gorslung is one of the prettiest."

"Gorslung. As in those—"

"Yes, *those.* I'm not the most impressive one in the family, I'm afraid. That would be my uncle Mendel. Who himself is a great-grandnephew of Chancellor Wilhelm. A reign short-lived as the rest of them. He tried to remove the head of the Crypsis secret police, and they returned the favor." He motions for Guy to sit. "I apologize. I'm boring you. As much as you can bore a man who's currently shitting himself."

Guy tries to erase whatever wrinkled face he's wearing. "Sorry."

"Quite all right. No doubt you've already guessed you've been fired." Bertram opens a desk drawer. "Your creditor is solely Borisch & Sons, correct?"

"As … far as I know."

"Good. Makes things easier." He removes a stack of papers, and it takes a moment for Guy to recognize his contract, with all its amendments and violations and receipts and retractions. "You've already got a novel's worth of shit in here. Theft, covert secondary employment, unauthorized pets in the barracks, et cetera. Petty bullshit. Looks like you haven't worked off much of your debt. How long have you been with Borisch?"

"Four years."

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"I…" Guy hesitates. "Better than meatpacking."

"Is that where you were before Borisch?"

"Yeah. The plants on Strangleroot."

"So you didn't serve in Ostlerfell."

"Too young. By the time I hit fifteen I already had a contract."

"Hm." Bertram sifts through the papers. "Your captain reports: 'Guy Moulène is a liability who has cost this company more than he's made it. He has the dexterity of a slug and an intellect to match. His continued employment makes me question the concept of employment altogether. He and Dawn are the best I've had, by far.'"

Despite everything, the edges of Guy's mouth twitch.

"Your captain," Bertram continues, "maintains you aren't responsible for this disaster. That you never even saw any bug. Bullshit, obviously." Bertram pushes the papers aside and replaces them with a stack of photographs. Guy doesn't see the pictures so much as feel them, the blurred panic, a fragmented exoskeleton coated in a mist of paint, operagoers rushing past the marquee. "The photographs don't help, do they? Everyone is having a hard time finding the words to describe this … event.

The Palas is looking to pluck some heads. And yours is the ripest, as they say."

"I—" Guy wrings his hands between his knees. "I didn't—"

"An overeager exterminator at the wrong call. A man who's not allowed within a hundred paces of the Opera and yet—there he is, down in their cellars. Burning everything he can."

"I…" A cold sweat gathers at his brow. The certainty of Strangleroot disappears, replaced by the certainty he'll instead find himself in the Palas's carnivorous tulip beds, on the gallows, or center stage in the final act of *The Ripest Fruit on the Vine,* dressed as the leading man and crucified to raucous applause.

"You've put your company in a very bad position, Moulène," Bertram continues. "An indefensible position. But one in which—fortunately for both of us—Borisch & Sons can cheaply, and easily, be bought."

Guy releases his breath. "And you…"

"Why do you think I'm sitting in the chair?" He smiles, and Guy wonders if he should genuflect, grovel, cry—do whatever one does for a conqueror with the corpse of his rival underfoot.

"Are you from Sreckt?" he asks.

Bertram's laugh is warm, genuine. "Shit no. You think Boris would step aside for those bastards? I'm from Sanitation."

"Oh."

"Or, I *was.* Species Management. The Chancellery and I had some disagreements. Doesn't matter. I'm still a sanitary man at heart." He leans back, chair squeaking. "And no one else wants to touch this infestation with the end of a bayonet—not Sreckt, certainly not Boris. Turns out he's got his own debts."

Guy's heart pounds, vertiginous. "And you … why?"

"Why would I jump neck-deep into this mess?" Bertram asks. "Excellent question. Would you like some water? You seem thirsty. Hold on, I've got a bottle straight from the springs at Sullen Head." Before Guy can answer, he fetches a pitcher from the icebox on the shelf. "It's this dragon of yours, Guylag. This latest play in the Catoptric arms race we find ourselves in." Bertram pours two glasses and hands one to Guy. An attractive cologne drifts from his wrist. "This is my specialty. Every few years a novel monstrosity pops up from the river that even the experts can't take care of. Then they call me."

Guy takes the water and downs it. "Eir Gorslung—"

"Bertram, please."

"Eir Bertram—I've never seen anything like it."

"Few people have. This one is only known to myself and a handful of colleagues. Understandably a pest of that size is best kept under wraps. You know how this city is. We're a theatrical people. We overreact." He refills Guy's glass. "At the moment we're calling it a teratopod, though the contriver worm has also been floated. You know, from that old ballet." He seems relieved at Guy's nod. "You know it. You've discerning taste, Eir Moulène. I can trust a man with taste."

Guy flushes at the gentleman's honorific. "Eir Bertram … I didn't mean to. I tried to kill it and it only—"

"Reproduced." Bertram takes a cautious sip. "You tried phlogiston on it?"

"And BSPAF. Vitriol of Lun. Phytothrin. Everything I could. All at once."

"Ah. No wonder the whole place went to shit."

"Eir Bertram—it was—I don't know what it *did.* It peeled apart, it—"

"You agitated it during its fissional molt." He smiles, not unkindly. "There's no reason to feel so bad, Guylag. You couldn't know. You only did what you were supposed to. You're an exterminator. But the teratopod isn't like other bugs. It's more like us. It does the same thing we do when faced with mortality. It creates."

A shiver runs down Guy's neck. "The Srecktman. It did something to him."

"It stung him. Just like it did to you at Abrupt Ends."

"It didn't—"

"I spoke to your partner about it. Dawn is sure you were stung. You didn't report it. No, no, I understand. It doesn't matter. You survived. I'm intrigued to know how you treated it."

"I … don't know. Achewort tea and a good sleep, I guess."

"That's it?" Bertram shakes his head. "Well, not all stings envenomate. And venom doesn't have the same effect on everything. It's not a corrosive toxin. It doesn't digest material, in the sense of Whittleston termites. It—reshapes it, for lack of a better word. The teratopod doesn't eat so much as sculpt. No one really knows the details—at least no one at our current disposal. Believe it or not, you're about as foremost an expert as we can get right now. You and Dawn, having dealt with it firsthand." The crystalware sings as he refills Guy's glass. "So. We've got a peculiar infestation on our hands, Eir Moulène. An infestation that has caused quite a bit of damage already. I don't want that creature's progeny growing to the size of their brood-parent. From the look on your face, neither do you." He puts aside the decanter and rifles through his folders. "You're a Borischman. You don't leave a job unfinished. And so"—he slides over a paper—"finish it."

Guy glances over the page, decorated with an unfamiliar wax heading. "This … isn't my old contract."

"No, it's not. It's a lot simpler. This only deals with the shit that matters. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I have respect for the art form. I believe the terms of a contract should actually be binding." He pops open his bronze ink pad. "I don't want petty violations monopolizing my attention. They annoy me. So I've taken out all the rules that Borisch hirelings regularly break. Turns out that's most of the rules."

"I … see."

"The rest is the usual fare—terms subject to change without warning or negotiation, agree to any future amendments, et cetera, all the boring shit. You know."

Guy leans forward, holding his stomach, trying to interpret his own gut instincts as a hedge witch might the entrails of a rat. His eyes scan the neat, tiny typeface, then settle on a number at the bottom. With that salary, it'll only be a few years before it starts to spill into his own pocket.

"I'm not going to lie," says Bertram. "The bug we're going after is resilient and dangerous. I need a flexible contract. The kind that can change under tough circumstances. Just so you know what you're getting into." He reclines in his chair. "You can say no, my friend. This is an offer, not a demand. If you see yourself happier somewhere else, I'll find someone to buy your debts. Strangleroot is full of opportunities this season."

Guy stares at the contract. The words blur, too small to read. "What about Tyro?"

"Tyro?" Bertram smiles. "As in Guylag's squire?"

"My sister. My—the … unauthorized pet."

"Oh. Well, shit. I'll authorize her. Make her a real son of Borisch."

Guy's eyes wander to the ink pad. "I don't want her pressing her thumb to anything."

"Of course. Honestly—and I get that honesty is suspect coming from a man with a tie this blue—I'm happy to provide. Generosity earns more trust than coercion. Only a tyrant conquers with the sword, after all." A resigned look crosses the man's face. "I need trust right now. Borisch-Gorslung could not have asked for a rockier start."

"Borisch-Gorslung," Guy repeats.

"If that's not a mouthful enough, I can read the whole contract for you. The rest of your team declined that offer, though."

Guy glances across the desk to the other papers, imagining the grainy knot of Three's thumbprint, the tented arch of Dawn's, interrupted by the scar of a pact-rose thorn.

"Take your time," Bertram says. "Don't rush into anything."

Guy tries to hesitate, to think it over, to consider the photographs of Conundrum, the memory of Bebber's bizarre corpse. It's pointless, with the gears of Strangleroot churning, with the numbers adding in his head. *If I am damned anyway,* goes Faustech's famous aria, *then I might as well sin.*

He lifts his thumb, presses it to the cold ink, then, carefully, to the contract.

★ ★ ★

Florian leads Aster through the battle-torn jungle of ferns and wrought iron to the lorry. He throws open the door and shoves her inside, and she finds herself next to another passenger, the man from the streetcar, with the broken spectacles. He bears the marks of Florian's interrogation, wrists bound, jaw clamped open, slit tongue dangling in dripping ribbons from his mouth.

"We need privacy," Florian tells the stranger.

The man stares at him with swollen eyes.

"Now, please." Wordlessly, the man drops onto the wrecked street. "Thank you. You've been a great help."

As soon as his victim stumbles away from the lorry, Florian slams the door.

"What the fuck, Aster?" he growls. "Running off with a squatter—are you in *heat*?" He knocks the glass of the partition, and the men in the bed raise their visors. "There's a creature in the house back there. Lead, two shots, back of the head. Then start a fire."

"Don't, Florian," Aster says.

"Keep it clean. Be sure to get the whole property."

"Don't you dare. Elspeth will be furious."

Florian hesitates.

"Mallory is—he's her accessory this season." Aster bites her lip, unsure if she's dissuaded Florian or only given him more fuel. He considers her words, calculating the relative merits of plucking a weed or cultivating a rivalry. He frowns, then knocks again on the partition. The Tender Guardsmen resettle in their seats, and the lorry pulls away.

"What's with the robe?" Florian asks, examining his nails. There is still some blood under them. "You join a cult?"

"It's just a bathrobe." Aster leans against the window as they rock across the rubble and turn onto Eighteenth. "And it wouldn't be your business if I did."

“It would be the Marshal’s.”

She watches the streets crawl by, the empty bars, the canals, the floristry bursting from windows, the occasional cloud of wandering fumigant. As they pull onto Conundrum, rolling over the strip of jeweled cobblestones in the square, Aster searches for the damage. The scar over the plaza is smooth and unopened, the warped statuary hunches in place. Aside from the lines of Tender Guardsmen and the clusters of curious passersby, everything seems exactly as it had been.

“What happened last night, Florian?” she asks.

“You didn’t read the *Arbuscle* this morning?” He lifts his attention from his nails. “Someone tried to kill the Chancellor. At the playlet last night.”

“Tried?” Her stomach flutters to her throat. “They didn’t follow through?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She leans against the window. Instinct brings Mallory’s handkerchief to her face. She breathes in his scent, heart turning. “Well, that’s a shame, isn’t it?”

II

There are many pretty things in this world, things that please the senses, but very few have the right to be called Beautiful. Only the greatest and most fervent of men, who live and die and kill for their works, can lay any claim to Beauty. Only they have paid its price.

—Albrecht Vaughn

Make no mistake, there is something afoul in your city. My second night after checking in at the Birdcall Hotel (EXTORTIONATELY priced for the quality of bedsheets, I might add), I was running my bath when a violent ruckus took place in the hallway. I locked my door, retrieved my pistol, and promptly called the concierge (with NO REPLY). Then a sort of vile gas began to flow from under the doorjamb. It took mere seconds to fill my room, and stung every inch of my exposed person. Luckily, I was able to escape through the window. Unluckily, I had no time to dress. I, a PAYING GUEST, was left on the street in the middle of Beetle Moon without even my handkerchief for a loincloth. So NO, I did not have what you would call a "restful stay"! This whole city is PESTILENT, and I will not linger here a minute longer.

—Anonymous complaint filed to the Tiliard Tourism Bureau

INTERMEZZO

The prison lorry is the property of the Judicial Palas, secured physically by bands of metal and hardwood, metaphysically by hexes carved under the headliner. The logograms are shoddily done, and the mesh of the slitted window is a good spritz of formic acid away from disintegrating, but it makes little difference to the prisoner inside. He is devoid of his alchemical implements. His large, hirsute hands are bound, tingling under the raised scars where his captors had removed his thumbs.

The carriage rumbles along a curved acclivity; he can tell by the small shifts in force and the creak of machinery that they are spiraling up one of the main corkscrews of the midcity. It has been a winding, nauseating drive from the prisons deep in the core, so low they almost meet Strangleroot. He is relieved to know he will break the surface of Tiliard soon.

The stale air drips through the crosshatched bars of the window, cool, damp, with cloying notes of sewage and sugar-motor exhaust. A hint of ash makes him think it is Smoke Moon outside; a little sour, but far preferable to the stench of his lightless cell, where the atmosphere of shit and blood is only thickened by the moans of those driven mad by decades in the dark. “The Symphony,” the Grand Marshal calls it. The Exultant does have a unique appreciation for music.

Reames doesn’t know why they’ve dragged him from his cramped, wet cell, escorting him past the assassins and perverts and howling cultists stacked like animals in their cages. The bloody notches his fingernails have left on the wall, one for each approximated day of captivity, don’t add up to his sentence. He is not, as far as he knows, scheduled to be executed, in private or onstage. A retrial, maybe. A transfer, a pardon, a chance at appeal. A scheme of some sort. Whatever it is, it smells like his uncle.

He smiles when the trickle of damp midcity air relents, and the pound of machinery softens. There *is* smoke, the usual seasonal kind, but it has a dark tint to it, a soupçon of panic. A surge of vanity assures him that it must be about himself. The city has learned of his release, and terror is spreading from the University outward. Faculty are locking their doors, hiding their protégés; older students are escorting the younger ones to and from the dormitories, lest they fall prey to his genius. (“*Genius!*” cried the provost at his trial. “A scientific libertine who plays with his alchemy set like a child and children like alchemy sets.”)

The provost is, of course, the most blatantly envious of Reames’s breakthroughs. Even he, *especially* he, with his army of mutilated white rats, knows there are no organisms better suited for the volatility of alchemy than children. It is in their nature to change, on a chemical and metaphysical level. Reames had done nothing but direct the process.

Driven to emphasize this (once again) to the world, he leans his face against the wooden bars of the window and screams it into the overcity night. Like the lawyers and magistrates and the librettist who refused to put his discoveries to music, no one listens to him, least of all the two officers driving him.

Isolated in the cab, fully armed and incredibly bored, the soldiers exchange a cheerful and increasingly explicit conversation. One is too old to have served in Ostlerfell, the other is too young, but that doesn’t stop either from waxing poetic about their sexual conquests in the canyons, the trail of broken hearts each has left in that arid valley. They paint vivid pictures of shrubby gorges they’ve never seen, complain of the harsh, dry air and the harsh, dry girls who have grown up too far from the verdant blessings of the Catoptric. They pick up speed as they round the bend, talking of their pampered rivals in the Crypsis secret police, of the recent infestation below Conundrum Square, of the elder’s career as a hellrat-catcher before his service.

“Not bad meat on them, really,” he tells the kid before suddenly slamming on the brakes.

The vehicle lurches, and the passengers pitch forward from the impact. Neither man (nor their prisoner) sees what they hit, or what hits them—helpless in the explosive whorl of gravity, the driver flies headfirst through the windshield. The glass shatters; he tumbles over the hood of the lorry and onto the cobblestones, split skull releasing a wrinkled blossom of brain. His younger companion, blinded by the shower of glass, reaches for the wheel, but the vehicle is already rolling. It spills onto its side, then heaves belly-up in a heap of twisted metal and splintered wood.

When the young man’s head stops spinning, when he realizes all his limbs are intact, he crawls from the broken windshield on bloodied hands. Arduously, he extricates himself from the accident, then struggles to his feet. Dazed, he looks around, then looks again. He stumbles toward an approaching gentleman, who asks if he is all right, if the driver is dead, and if he has the keys to the back. As soon as he answers, a sidearm appears in the man’s hand. Investigators from Crypsis will find the soldier the next morning, a strange little poppy growing from the bullet hole in his forehead.

The occupant of the armored cell is bruised, shaken, but ultimately unhurt. He bangs against the back of the lorry, first with his head as the vehicle rolls, then, as it comes to a stop, with his shoulder, then with thumbless fists. He gropes for the splintered door, clawing at the wood until his rescuer undoes the latch. It is, to his delight, exactly who he expects.

"God, sorry," says his uncle. "Still fine-tuning those detonators."

They embrace, rocking in the scent of gunpowder and poppy-seed extract. Reames wants to say something nonchalant, something lifted from one of those ostensibly witty playlets, an *It took you long enough,* or *Is that a new Fauniche you're wearing,* but he knows there is no better way to get a box to his ear than to spurt a cliché in front of his uncle.

"I need new thumbs," he says instead, because at the moment, it strikes him as the most important.

HUNTER'S CANTATA

The season of the Smoke Moon drifts from Tiliard's roots upward. It rises from the shores of the Catoptric, the pipework of rhizomes and limestone where falling pebbles spark like flint in the reeds. Green witch-flames burp to life on the water's surface, both guideposts and hazards to passing riverboats. A blanket of black cloud rolls in from the fields as farmers light the harvest's detritus.

Smoke envelops the city, and local mycorrhizae proliferate in response. Luminescent fingers of mycelia spring between roots, growing and decaying within the span of a few days. They're a welcome seasonal convenience, providing erranders with shortcuts, lovers with elopement routes, and Borisch-Gorslung's nascent research and development team with a clear path to haul mountains of equipment around its undercity territory.

Unfamiliar personnel flood the barracks. Carpenters hammer new catwalks into place while technicians install electrolyte wiring. Alchemic apparatuses are wheeled from the elevator, coils and agar grids poking out from under black burlap. Ammunition floods the company armory: powder kegs of carbamates, darts carved with hexes, burn traps, hunting spears, spray guns. New uniforms, including formal overcity coats, are delivered to each apartment, ironed with protective runes and steamed in leechbane. Guy receives, courtesy of the new management, a bronze nozzle, a new set of repellent grenades, and a suit of iron vine reinforced with chitinous plating pried from the teratopod's back. It's a little uncanny, crawling into the exoskeleton of a creature he's killed, but even stranger is wearing its likeness as a golden pin on his overcoat. The new sigil of Borisch-Gorslung is beautifully designed, a stylized teratopod that circles, like the unending Contriver Worm, to devour its own tail.

Three can't stop laughing at it. "Well," she says, "if I haven't seen a better metaphor for this whole thing coming back to bite us in the ass."

Less than a week after the grand restructuring, Bertram appears outside the door to her workshop, carrying a long gunmetal box. He is a bizarre sight; he wears no armor but his pressed suit and a wide smile, impervious to the smoke and howling river winds. Exterminators and cleaners and cooks loiter at the perimeter of the gathering platform to witness the spectacle. No Boris has been seen on the stump's underside since the Sixth, and even then it was only to carry on dubiously consensual affairs with his female hirelings.

"What a surprise, Eir Gorslung," Three grunts. She cranks her arm to salute him. Guy, instinctively, follows suit.

"Call me Bertram," he says. "And for God's sake, thaw out a little. Just here to deliver some information. Copies of your new contracts will arrive in the common chute tomorrow. Give it a week for the *Manual* addendum."

"An addendum already?" Three asks.

"Three ninety-eight should be easy to stitch into the binding. The thing isn't very bulky. Not exactly a wealth of information on the subject. I'm hoping these will help with that." He places the box at Three's feet, then clicks it open. A long tube of metal telescopes from it, barbed and bladed and coated in a sweet-smelling pheromone.

"Some trap," Dawn mutters.

"Bioalchemic. Best wear these." He pulls gloves from his pocket and slips them on. "Aim is to capture, not kill. Lest we forget what happened the last time we got violent with one of those things." He kneels, demonstrating how to set up and disassemble the trap. "We're no longer mindless exterminators. We're *gardeners* now. 'Tenders of our earthly paradise,' as Montresor puts it."

"Our earthly what?" Three mutters under her breath.

"I've got my thumb on the phone lines," Bertram continues. "Any calls that concern a bug of a certain size or disposition will be relayed through me, to you. Especially overcity ones."

"Sreckt usually takes overcity," Guy says.

"Don't worry about our dear brothers. They're tied up in court about that whole Conundrum business." He removes his gloves. "Do you have your new suits? Good—wear them. Iron vine alone won't protect you from its venom. And even then—well, I'd recommend staying away from its mouth." He tosses his gloves into the furnace. "We'll start in the square, then work outward. See how far this infestation has spread. Any questions, concerns, bring them to me. Any hour, any day. I mean it. I work for you as much as you work for me."

"Sure thing, Eir Gorslung," Three says.

"Bertram, please. I won't ask again." He ducks through the doorway. "Stay safe. The integrity of this city's structure depends on you. The very ground above our heads, gentlemen." He offers a parting smile and retreats across the gathering platform, progress slowed by the crowd.

"'The very *ground* above our *heads,* gentlemen.'" Tyro drops down from a branch over the doorway, dress soiled and already in need of rehemming.

"Where'd you come from?" Guy says. "How'd you get so filthy?"

"Rickhardt told me we're all gonna die," she replies. "That there's a dragon loose."

"Just a clutch of small ones," Three reassures her.

"My size?" she asks, leaning over one of the traps. Barehanded, she fiddles with the mechanism. "Let me catch one."

"Don't play with those," Guy says. She frowns and moves on to the other boxes, snapping open a few buckles before her brother can grab her wrist. "I mean it. *Stop.*"

"They're taking weird stuff down to R&D," she says. "Pictures and books. Jewels and stuff."

"*Jewels,* grub?" Three laughs. "You teach her to lie like that, Guylag?"

"I'm not lying!"

"They're pesticide pellets, you dolt," Guy says. "Quit digging through shit. Don't open any boxes, or sacs, or *traps,* for God's sake. Eir Bertram will kill you."

"He won't know."

"He will. He can tell whenever anyone's laid hands on his treasures. And if he finds out, he'll ring a little gold bell, and then you'll disappear in the night—instantly. No trace. You'll wake up at the bottom of the river, and there'll be nothing I can do to help you." Tyro rolls her eyes. "I'm serious, Ty. He's made a pact with the devil, like Faustech."

"No," she replies. "He's more like … Don Javunech, maybe."

"Or how about the whore with a heart of gold?" Three offers. "You know, from that one."

"He's former military," Dawn says, watching Bertram push his way through the growing crowd. "Crypsis."

"I thought he was Sanitation," Guy says.

"Defense, Sanitation, what's the difference?" Three asks. "All sewer men are soldiers. Even the fancy ones." She pulls out a cigarette. "Except you, Moulène. I assume you shot your own foot to get out of service."

Guy sighs. "'The more my lady insults a man to his face, the more she praises him behind his back.'"

"The fuck are you on about? You *quoting* something at me, boy?"

"Bertram read me your report. The one where you said I'm the best you've had."

"The best what? Excuse to quit?"

"Best lay," Tyro suggests, which draws a gentle smack from Guy and a laugh from Three.

"Hah! Not for the price he's asking. Oh, quit grimacing, Moulène. Suck on your pacifier." She jabs the cigarette into Guy's mouth and returns her gaze to Bertram. He still hasn't made it to the elevator, stopping to shake every hand, to return every greeting. "I just can't see his angle yet."

"What angle?" Guy asks. "He's from Species Management. Makes sense he'd be the one hired to deal with this thing."

"Hired? Exiled, more likely," Three replies. "He's a Gorslung. They make political enemies in the womb. Probably sent down here as punishment for something. I just don't get why he's so jolly about it."

"There are worse jobs," Guy says.

"Oh? Like ushering at the Opera? Like serving wine and sitting on gentlemen's laps and sucking on their big old cigars?"

"They weren't that generous," Guy says, ignoring Dawn's sidelong glance. "Only the Secretary let me try his cigar."

"Face it, Moulène. You have no idea what a bad job looks like. Let alone the worst."

"What *is* the worst job?" Tyro asks.

"Meatpacking," Guy says.

"Latrine detail," Dawn says.

Three chews on the question. "Well, given the rate and method of turnover, I'd say Laurel Chancellor."

★ ★ ★

Conundrum is a wasteland. Even under normal circumstances, the place is as haunted in the day as other locales are at deepest night. Newspapers exfoliate in the wind, while ghostly wisps of revelers stumble through the smoky light, animated by the dregs of adrenaline and drink. Alleyways usually filled with buskers and beggars stand empty; the only trace of music is an ill-tuned harpsichord playing a solemn rendition of Tasarte's "Aubade" from a brothel window.

RESIDUAL TOXIN BURDEN UNKNOWN. FULL RESPIRATORS ADVISED, says the telegram handed to Three as they step off the elevator at headquarters. The other Borisch-Gorslung employees, including management, gather in the atrium to see them off, as

if to war.

As they approach the site of the disaster, unease knots in Guy's stomach. It's not so much the destruction that unnerves him; always, some part of Conundrum is falling apart, victim to an overcrowded balcony or a showy alchemic trick gone wrong. It's the stillness, the silence, the way the square is splayed open like the shell of a giant, unspeakable hatching.

The wound in the street is still fresh, flanked by peeling scales of cobblestones. Mutilated artworks, chewed, digested, and regurgitated, rise from the ground as if grown from it. Charged sap drips from exposed bundles of wiring; pipework zigzags skyward, spurting the purple sludge of spent Catoptric water. A carpet of dried paint grows mosslike over the square, crawling across twisted statuary and broken façades.

"Goddamn. What a *toxin,*" Three mutters through her respirator. "Can't believe you took a dose of that, Moulène."

A shiver travels up his spine, then vibrates through the scar on his ear. He hopes the venom has evaporated from his body, that he won't carry it in his bones, sequestered in a rib or wrist until an unlucky fracture releases it back into his bloodstream.

Three kneels at the edge of the gash, boots sinking into the softened ground. She swings her gunmetal box from her shoulder and pulls out a trap, long and wide as a straightened leg. She glances down the crevasse, at the oozing columns of paint and sap, at the howling faces of tortured statues, and seems to think better about crawling into it. Instead, she clips a trap to her ropes and instructs them to send it down. Dawn counters the weight with what remains of the Grand Marshal's statue—whose obscene deformities he pauses, in a rare moment of indulgence, to relish.

"'Hail, Commandant, hail the chisel that carves me,'" he sings to the tune of his unit's march, using his old commander's splayed metal legs as a pulley.

They set the traps throughout the square: one by the slumped remains of the Ministry of Aesthetics, in the shadow of a groaning monstrosity that appears to be an oil landscape fused with a giant theatrical puppet. They leave another two on the east side, near the Opera. Guy's wrist burns as he pries one open under the ruined marquee, and Three disappears into the building to set a few more. She returns to report interior damage as queer as it is extensive.

"Structure's all right," she says. "Seats and curtains and all that—melted. It's velvet soup in there." She wipes her boots on the cobblestones, leaving streaks of purple goo. "Don't look so glum, Poet-King. The place has already burned down what, fifteen times?"

"Twelve," Guy says, though he's not sure if the incident in which the insane Marshal Nathaniel Thwart crashed his airship through the backdrop technically counts.

The day stretches on. Repairmen come in waves, masons for the stonework, electricians for the sap-lines, a lunar priest for the evil aura. Midafternoon, when Guy is laying out a trap by Bean Pulp, they get a call. Something pugnacious is stalking Bast Street, large and stinking and hungry, like the infamous Butcher.

The alarm turns out to be false, just a giant mantis crawled out of the mud vents. It's an ugly specimen, and mean, but manageable. The brood-parent and eggs are disposed of with a sawblade and a spray of formic vitriol, respectively.

A second call comes a day later, this time from a manor in Fog Hill. Then a third, then a fourth, each unusual but ultimately dead ends: urea wasps the size of blast mice, blast mice the size of goliath crabs, goliath crabs bizarrely fused into a centipede-like train of claws and chattering armor, and a particularly nasty dung possum that, once captured, turns out to be the client's lost lapdog. The most difficult job of the week is a swarm of pleasure hornets escaped from a bootlegger's hive, and mostly due to the necessity of fighting off the man who found them, whose dozen or so stings have convinced him he is a prophet and the hornets his followers. Dawn holds him down while Three and Guy smoke out the nest, lingering to squeeze a generous amount of honey into an empty milk carton. Dawn frowns at the practice out of habit, but Bertram's permissive contract technically allows Three to bottle some for sale, and Guy to add a dollop to his tea that night, after which he sits under the glowing weave of fungal mycelia, braiding his sister's rapturous curls.

"It's so, it's just so—" he hiccups, tears in his eyes. "I can't believe it. It's so pretty when it's clean."

"I don't like it," Tyro says. "Three says I could get a lot for it."

"Don't you dare. Don't you ever cut it—when this is all over, when I've paid everything back—I'll get you a bodkin. Like overcity girls." He bunches her hair in his fist, tugging gently. "A silver one. You can wear it on the riverboat, when we go."

"Em," Tyro growls. "I don't want a bodkin."

"A tiara, then. Like Orphan Clevette, when she transforms into a princess."

"Not that, either."

"You're gonna have to wear something on your head." He pulls her into his chest and rocks, slowly, as he imagines a boat rocks, or at least how historian-librettist Otto Lascherhack depicts it in *Birth of the Deathbed.* He closes his eyes, recalling the opera's swaying backdrop, the metal sheets rattling offstage as the storms overtook the explorers' ship, Tiliard's brave forefathers who traversed the acid sea in search of paradise.

"How about a tricorn hat, then?" he suggests.

This time, Tyro seems to consider it. "Better."

★ ★ ★

While Dawn prepares supper, Guy bends over a sheaf of papers and teases out the contents from the typeface. The *Manual* sits before him on the table, splayed to its final pages. The leather spine is sturdy but soft, nearing the end of its tenure but still wide enough to accommodate a few more entries. This one is mercifully short and, to both his disappointment and relief, not named after him.

*398: The Contriver Worm (*Teratopoda ecdyntus*)*

Because no one has captured a photograph of the thing, the entry's illustration is hand-drawn—astoundingly well, and by Rickhardt, of all people, who claims to have been a successful children's illustrator before his exile (probably a lie, though he always dares his coworkers to grab any overcity ten-year-old and ask them his old name).

Carnivorous and highly reactive. Early instars are susceptible to phytothrin, pyrethrin, vitriol of Lun, and Borisch & Sons Proprietary Aerosolized Formulation (BSPAF). Sexual maturity is reached at approximately a dozen molts, after which a brood of 12–24 clones detach from the parent (see: "Whittleston-Bacher strategy of fissiparity," pp. 200–202). Toxin is volatile and extremely noxious, AF scale 883. Direct envenomation is often disfiguring and commonly fatal. Refer to trained unit for disposal.

"Commonly fatal," Guy mutters. He wonders how many stings have been witnessed, by Bertram or anyone else—surely not enough to prove the trend implied by *commonly.*

He lifts his head, examining Tyro on the stool across from him. She's half naked, dress splayed on the table. She picks aimlessly with her needle, occasionally reaching up to pinch a bothersome puff of tissue under her nipple. Guy can't help but wonder if they'd been there the day before.

"That's not how you hem a skirt, Ty," he says, rubbing softness into the binding sap. He pulls a string of hemp from the cover pouch and threads it through the perforations in the gathering's crease. "Make it even, like I'm doing here. No, that's not—you can't just make shit up."

"You do."

"No, I don't."

Sour-faced, she watches him drive his needle. "So what's that page say?"

"You'd know if you sat down and learned to read."

"I don't even think *you* can read. What's it say?"

"*The Contriver Worm.* See? It's the ballet, by Drovick."

"Drovick?"

"You know him. The one in jail all the time."

"Oh. You haven't showed me that ballet."

"It's not my favorite. It's too short—well, the story is short, the performance can last for days. It's about how the world ended. There's a plague and some angels and a big worm made of a train of dancers, and every few minutes they switch out, one by one, until it's a completely different worm. Or, here's the question—if it's the same worm, but with different parts. It's a metaphor for something, I think. I dunno."

"That's sounds really boring," she says.

"It is. Puppets are better. Like they use for the dragon in *Saint Guylag.*"

"Perfect," Dawn mutters, bending over the oil-drum lid he's repurposed into a griddle. He waves away the steam with his red mitt and pulls his grease-beetle from the heat. "Did you hear about Borisch?"

"I thought we were Borisch," Tyro says.

"No, I mean Eir Borisch. The Twelfth."

"Hear what?" Guy asks.

"Dead. Fled to his hunting estate upriver, but someone followed him there. Picked off the sons, too." Dawn delivers the bug to the table and seats himself. His tone is level, matter-of-fact. "Maybe Sreckt. Maybe someone from our own management. Some casualty of restructuring."

"Is that bad?" Tyro asks. "Should we feel bad?"

"I don't know," Guy answers. He turns back to his needlework. "Never actually met the man."

★ ★ ★

The bishop's wife leans over her vanity, wrapped in a gown so sleek and black it resembles a mourning robe more than an

evening dress. She streaks dark bands across her eyes while Guy applies perfume to her husband's beard.

"It really is awful, that infestation on Conundrum," she says. "All of a sudden people are seeing bugs everywhere, like it's de rigueur to be contaminated with something. It's biologic-threat this, or state-of-emergency that. A miracle we could even reserve a table at Pierre's." She straightens, eyeing Guy in the mirror. "We were worried when we saw Borisch & Sons in the papers."

"I'm fine," Guy answers, straightening the bishop's tie. Neither of them says a thing about his call from the infirmary—obviously the porter had not passed on his message. "And it's Borisch-Gorslung now."

"*Gorslung,*" the bishop mutters with the deep contempt of familiarity. "Of course it's one of that pestilent brood. They love buying their way into a scandal."

"Darling, no politics in the bedroom," says his wife.

"God, I'm only glad they closed the Opera until repairs are done," he sighs. "The Seamster Laureate invited us to see *The Only Good Man,* and I'd rather drink the Catoptric than sit through another production of that dreck."

"It *has* been awfully stale lately," his wife admits. "It's all been *Don Javunech* and Tasarte ballets since the War."

"And this utter blight of still life the galleries are having! Neo-Repressionist slop. The only color they use is blue."

"There's always the smaller venues," Guy offers. "I've heard the Argland plays *What My Husband Doesn't Know* on new moons."

"Oh dear," the bishop laughs, affixing a winged boutonniere to his vest. "A man of the pearls can't be seen at a gentleman's playlet. Not in this régime. Better to have an ineradicable silverfish problem. Darling, am I wearing this right? It looks crooked."

"It is. Here—you've got to wear it left, *here,* over the heart, at the angle of Venus."

"Ah yes, like the chiromancer says."

"*Cardio*mancer, darling."

"Right. The cardiomancer." The bishop winks at Guy as they follow his wife down the hall. "Reads the arteries like lifelines. Convinced her that angina is a sign of poor character. Each vessel is associated with a different vice."

"Right coronary for greed," she says. "Left anterior descending for cowardice."

"I have no idea what she's talking about. And neither does that kook. The man's a radiographer, not a hedge witch."

"Exactly the kind of thing someone with a stiff aorta would say."

"Now, son—" The bishop turns to Guy. "The knife and the mask are on the kitchen table. Supper should be over by two. Be sure to really trash the place." He slips his feet into his polished shoes. "Be positively indecent. Give us a good scare."

"Of course, Father," Guy says.

"In the meantime, help yourself to the wine in the cellar. There's a bottle of '93 the Grand Marshal gifted to me. Smash that one first."

"Yes, Eir Bishop." It is the porter's day off, so Guy goes to the cloakroom and retrieves their overcoats. "Be careful out there. There really are some nasty bugs around."

"Of course, lad. We'll see you tonight." The bishop hesitates at the entranceway. "We were worried about you, you know." He dons his emerald mask and opens the door. "You should stop by the confessional sometime. It's so rare that I'm stuck in that booth with anyone half fucking decent."

TULIP FOOD

Gorslung's Chancellery, like all the predecessors on whose corpses it was built, stands at the very heart of Tiliard. Surrounded by the concentric rings of architecture and history, it is a playground for tyrants' aesthetic whims as erratic as their reigns. It is the Chancellor's greatest ongoing project, a sky-bound orchard of stained glass and gold leaf cultivated over seventeen years.

A monstrosity, in Sorav's opinion, an opinion which stays safe in his throat. He stands tight-lipped in his master's office, as always, boots sinking into the obscene lushness of his Ostlerfell Blue carpet. The walls are clothed in art and artifacts, bookshelves stuffed with classics, from Aufhocker's original handwritten libretti to the first edition of *The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species.* The only bare wall is the one behind his desk, perpetually empty in anticipation of his portrait.

Gorslung reclines in his leather chair, shoes crossed leisurely on his desk. The Surgeon General stands over him, wielding a tweezer fashioned from the pincers of a domestic beetle. She prods his wrist, prying loose a thin piece of flesh. Whistling, she twists open a jar and drops it inside.

"I think someone's aiming for my seat, Max," the Chancellor sighs as Dr. Whyck retreats with her sample. "They missed, but it was still a good shot. A lesser man might've died."

A better man might've died, Sorav thinks.

"Not much to look at, is it?" He lifts his arm to show off the injury, a jagged black eschar running from his thumb tip to his wrist. The adjacent skin is red, swollen over his engagement jewels, but the truly striking thing about the wound is its smell—or the lack of it. The Chancellor's perfume ends where his hand begins, an angry, pestilent negation that draws the eye and unsettles the stomach.

According to Crypsis, the attack had been swift, sudden, and silent. Despite the chaos outside the Chancellor's box, the thrown objects, the impoverished tycoons pounding at the doors and the newly enriched gamblers taunting them from their upgraded seats, the show, as they say, went on. The victory lily was blessed by the impresario and tucked into the Laurel Dame's crown, as per tradition, and *A House Call* proceeded wonderfully. By the time Karlotta's descent into libertinism culminated in a rapturous orgy, everything had been in place: the infinitely talented soprano Fae Blush onstage, the Chancellor's infinitely beautiful fiancée on her knees, a bottle of Dagdrun '88 open on the table, and the Perfumer Laureate in the corner with his traveling organ, ready to spritz him with a virile afterglow. The night was poised to end in intense, palpable climax, like any good drama.

The first sign something was amiss had been the moths. The Chancellor had caught a sapphire flutter in his peripheral vision, lowered his lorgnette and watched the bug die in Elspeth's bobbing coiffure. Shortly after the first, another twitched to stillness. Then a third. The Chancellor, who had paid a fortune for Elspeth's living tiara and was quite sure this was grounds for a refund, felt a twinge of annoyance. A seam ripped open in his weave of interlocking pleasures. Suddenly, his wine left a bitter aftertaste, his perfume struck him as cloying. The high note of Karlotta's orgasm arrived dismally flat. The Chancellor, at the very edge of the final cadence, felt himself soften.

Though he couldn't save his erection, he tried to save the moths. Not because they were a worthy investment, but because deep in his heart, he felt that stir of pity, that pathos, that pure love of life that had driven him to revive Tiliard by any means necessary. He reached out, scooping a handful of the poor things, and noticed the flower wilting in his fiancée's hair. Whatever allomone had killed the bugs appeared to work twofold on the lily. Its petals, sculpted so impeccably from the paper-thin flesh of the dancer's wound, wilted; its bony stamen cracked to dust, its stem browned, still tangled with the shredded red threads of the victor's cravat. Its leaves came apart in long, fuzzy strings, curling against the Chancellor's fingers as he brushed by them. It wasn't until he lifted his hand and saw his thumb that disappointment turned to panic.

He felt no pain, at least not until he laid his eyes on the swollen red papule, a bump no larger than a pea. Suddenly, a cold jolt shot to his elbow. He dropped his wine and ripped the tiara from Elspeth's hair in a shower of moth dust and wilted threads. His glass shattered, his perfume decayed. Elspeth, terrified but unharmed, groped for her fiancé, begged him to tell her what she had done wrong—but for the first time in his reign, if not his life, he was utterly speechless.

Crypsis sounded the alarm. Lights were lit, exits secured, Tender Guard called. The venue bloated with fumigants, vomiting a deluge of theatergoers. Ushers and security men flooded the Chancellor's box to find no assassin, no weapon, no blood—only a confetti of moth wings and wilted petals, and the Chancellor cradling a sore thumb.

"I swear to God something bit me," he sighs. "Look at it, Max. Tell me that's not a sting of some sort." He leans back in his

chair, examining his skin. His sutures are decently done, for a Surgeon General with far more experience in entomology than human medicine. “Can’t tell when I got it. I shook a lot of hands. Touched a lot of glass stems. More than a few moths.” He lifts his thumb to his nose. “There’s a toxic stink to this. A familiar stink. Someone tried to send me a message. Well, Max?”

“Well, what?”

“You’re the only other man in this city with access to bioalchemic weaponry. You’re first on my list.” There is a sarcastic edge to the Chancellor’s scent. “And I hear you’ve been getting cozy with our scandalous new debutant.”

“Prophet? I’ve questioned him already.”

“Questioned? My dear, you *sponsored* him. Crypsis tells me your perfumer offered forty thousand marks and a short-term contract for him.” His grin is hardly softened by his scent. “Been lonely lately?”

Sorav says nothing. He’s wearing thin armor today—bilge musk and liver tree ash. He will not get away with denial.

“Oh, Max, you poor dog,” the Chancellor laughs. “That’s an old wound. It’s *sad* really, seeing you still licking at it.”

Sorav grits his teeth. “If I intended to kill you, Eir Chancellor, I’d have done it more directly.”

“So you would. You’ve always lacked imagination.” He extends his wrist so an apprentice scent-maker can adorn it. “The Neo-Repressionists are taking credit. Those washed-up hacks still think they have a foothold in my opera. And with all this chatter about Extemporism or what have you nowadays—” He brings his wrist to his nose, brow furrowed. “No good,” he tells the girl. “No fucking good. God, at the very least my perfumer should’ve seen this coming. He should’ve smelled it, he’s the goddamn Laureate.” A streak of anger penetrates his scent. “Hang him, Max. I’m done with him. And Demetrius. I want Demetrius.”

“Dead?” Sorav asks.

“No, you brute. I want him *paid.* I want to slap my name all over him and shower him in diamonds.” He stands and paces, his good hand tapping an almost cheerful beat against his leg. “I want him to play me onstage, Max. I want him to dance at my wedding. So hand him over when you’re done with him.”

Sorav narrows his eyes and considers the possibility this is a rigged affair. The Chancellor is known to put on theatrics for political gain, to turn the tide against a rival, or for his own amusement. Everything in his vicinity is tightly controlled, every accident a happy one, every misfortune a seed of a blessing. “‘Great beauty is sown in great strife,’” he likes to say, quoting his favorite Vrenecker platitude.

“I don’t know, Max,” the Chancellor says. “The impresario had quite a bit riding on Ludovico. Shake him up a little. The Sreckt brothers, too—there’s a pair who knows a thing or two about moths, and they’re still bitter about that whole acquisition business.” He sighs, leaning over his desk. “Pests everywhere. They don’t die easily, do they?”

“If they died easily, they wouldn’t be pests,” Sorav offers blandly.

“*Still!* After all this work! All these years. Still in-fucking-*fested.*” The Chancellor moves in a blur. Sorav is fairly sure he is throwing his arm across the table, sweeping everything to the floor, but his scents only project him straightening a stack of papers, each stamped neatly with the sigil of BGS. “I won’t let it happen to me, Max. I refuse to be just another dead ring in this tree. Unlike you, I’m not going to wait until my assassination is done before I pursue the culprits.”

“Yes, Eir Chancellor.”

“This is first and foremost a failure in species management. This is your responsibility. So take care of this, and do it before my wedding. I promised this city the show of a century and it has to be flawless.” He sighs and sits once more. “If anything goes wrong, I can’t guarantee dear Aufhocker will get to keep his thumbs. And that would be a pity, after he wrote such a beautiful duet for us.”

The Marshal’s heart, or the cobbled-together parts of it, sinks in his chest. “What would you have me do?”

“I don’t care. You’re head of Sanitation. Ply your art. Throw some ecdytoxin around. Remind them who I am. And take out a few of my relatives while you’re at it. I’m fairly sure a couple of my nephews are plotting a coup.” Wrist stiff, he struggles to remove his snuffbox from his breast pocket. “Just don’t be heavy-handed about it. I won’t have my reign associated with poor taste.”

★ ★ ★

“How dare you get abducted without me?” Elspeth floats across the Palas balcony, beaded skirt glinting against the golden sky. Far below, in the carnivorous gardens, a groundsman hoses blood from the tulips. “I was stuck in a Crypsis safe room getting my hair butchered while you’re getting yourself ravished by a *jailbird.*”

She is unhurt and a bit frantic, in her joyful, affectated way. She twirls a silver hairpin in her hand, useless now that most of her hair is gone. Tangled with insect parts and shredded lily-flesh, what could not be sanitized had to be cut away. Somehow, she is even more radiant without her dark waves, face framed by a wild little bob.

“It’s just so…” Elspeth continues, biting back a grin. “God, it’s so Neoclassicist of you, to get kidnapped by a handsome

squatter."

"I wasn't *kidnapped,*" Aster repeats. "And he's not a squatter. He owns—well, ostensibly, he owns the—" She hesitates to call it a house. "Anyway, it wasn't bad. Nothing compared to what you went through."

"Oh, don't flatter me. It was only a good excuse to cut my hair for the wedding." She splays out on her seat and fans herself. "I'll paint all about it later."

Florian appears on the balcony, carrying a plate of drinks and some canapés. "We're glad you're safe, vralen," he says.

"It would've been just another night," Elspeth continues, "had the Tender Guard not gassed the whole scene, insisting it was an *attack* of some sort. Clearly it was just a wayward burglar moth. Or a perfuming accident. They spark sometimes, and that Laureate—that man is so far gone he has no idea what he's doing. His whole airway is just ecdytoxic tumor at this point. No offense." She takes a lager. "Thanks, Flo."

"It's Florian, vralen," he says.

"Honestly, the worst part of the night was the small talk. Let me tell you, there's nothing more annoying than being stuck in a box with a man who thinks he's about to die—started talking nonstop about his portrait. What we should *name* it. *Patron of Patrons,* he suggested. *The Last Poet-King.* I just about died. I'm halfway to calling it *Florian Crickshaw*."

Aster has no doubt she would. Elspeth is attached to her ironic titles—unconventional but undeniable proof of her skill, since no matter how misleading the name, her subjects are effortlessly characterized. Her last unfinished commission, a single brown brushstroke on a background of velvet green, is instantly recognizable as the Seamstress Laureate.

"Oh, this is warm, Flo," Elspeth says, taking a sip of her beer. "Why is this warm?"

"I don't know," Florian answers. "It's warm?"

"Here, feel it. We need another. Actually, something stronger. I have a big event tomorrow I need to be hungover for."

He plucks the beer from her hand, palpates the glass, and then, frowning, disappears.

"What event?" Aster asks.

"Just a meeting to plot the bridal luncheon. I wanted Hart Park, with badminton—but my patron wants to show off his riverboat. Flo didn't make these, did he?" She takes a sandwich and opens it to ensure there are no fingers or ears inside. "You're coming to it, by the way."

"To what?" Aster asks. "The meeting?"

"No, I don't hate you that much, dear. The luncheon. Wherever it is—it'll be early next month."

"I thought—"

"We're moving it up. He wants the wedding on Rut Moon now."

"No."

"I know! A wedding in Rut—*kill* me. But what to do? Call off the engagement?"

"You could. You should. Call it off and run."

"In my heels? They'd catch me within a block."

"Sabotage it, then. Poison the banquet."

"That's an idea—Lorelei had a wedding like that. You remember her, the sculptor? When she married that Wherewithal banker, his old rivals sent a casserole the size of a car. It really was a delightful play. The groom's whole party puked through the reception. Everyone lived—well, except for the ones who had two helpings. I mean, it *is* a lesson. We all really shouldn't eat as much as we do."

Florian returns and hands Elspeth a fresh glass. "Still warm," she says, and this time, he's wise enough to disbelieve her. He sighs, retreats to the balustrade, and nurses his own beer.

"You should get the orchestra to play something heinous during your duet," Aster suggests.

"Oh, *yes*! Imagine—I'd give my right thumb to hear them play the old Borisch company jingle." Elspeth sits up, inspired, and Aster can't help but grin at her perfect, deep vibrato. "'Brave men and women, oh, brave'—come on, Flo, you too, take the harmony—"

She doesn't wait for him to respond before she flings her hairpin in his direction. Instinctively, Florian drops his beer and whips his arm toward the streak of silver—Aster half expects him to stumble over the balustrade in pursuit of the bauble, flailing down into the gardens, but his feet stay on the tiles. Flawlessly, his fingers close around it.

His glass shatters, and the air stills. Florian opens his hand and gazes at the treasure in his palm, wide-eyed and wordless as a dog.

"Don't drop it," Elspeth says, shock evident through her perfume. She has never so severely misjudged a throw. Maybe her affliction is worsening, Aster thinks. Maybe she too is avidly avoiding a visit to the Surgeon General. "Don't let it leave your hand."

A lump travels down Florian's throat. "I won't."

"And don't let *anyone* catch you with it. You'll … see me tonight, I suppose."

He nods. As he rolls the hairpin in his hand, stroking it with his thumb, the air turns cold in Aster's lungs. His scent is changing by the second, maturing, peeling—shaping him into something much more menacing than a lovestruck child.

It is only the touch of another perfume in the air, an aggressive mix of liver tree ash and bilge musk. The Marshal glides into the sunlight, blinding in his white uniform, eyes fixed on Florian.

"Eir Sorav," El says. "Lovely to see you—if I could. Step back into the shade, would you?"

He doesn't. "Always a pleasure, Vralen Schölin. Glad you're safe."

"I'd say the same for you, if it could be any different."

"I'm going to borrow these two for a minute."

"Of course. Bring them back in one piece. Or two pieces. No more than two."

"No more than two," the Marshal assures her.

Aster and Florian follow their patron from the balcony, through the arched hall, and up the stairs. For a moment Aster fears he's leading her to her punishment, up to the jeweler's shop to have a ring of magnetite drilled into her wrist, a record of her truancy. The Palas jeweler is a fine, fast worker, but that is only because, like his master, he eschews the nonessentials, including anesthetic.

"I was told you were found in some contaminated wreckage," the Marshal says. "How are you breathing?"

"Quite well," Aster replies. "Considering."

"You're wheezing."

"Not much, Eir Patron."

Sorav glances at her. "If you need a lavage, I can call the Surgeon General. Dr. Whyck will be happy to see you."

"No, no," Aster says quickly. "I'll be all right."

"Very well."

The Marshal leads them past the solarium, up the stairs to his office. He ushers them in and closes the door, moving to the window, where he mulls something over for a minute. Aster has long since learned not to ask what he thinks about when he stares into the grimy haze.

Florian is the first to buckle under the silence. "Eir Patron," he starts, "how may we serve you?"

"Serve me, Florian?" He turns with a stern frown. "Firstly, you can serve me by staying away from the Chancellor's wife."

Florian's scent shifts as his fingers tighten around the hairpin. "She's not his wife yet."

"Whatever she is, she's a convenient way to get yourself killed. And you're no good to me dead." He extends his hand. "Give it to me."

"She threw it. I caught it. The Chancellor can't do anything about that."

"Sure he can. And I won't see the Palas heir fed to his own tulips."

"No," Florian growls, "that would be embarrassing for you, wouldn't it?"

The Marshal gives him a look that could freeze the Catoptric. "Florian. I care for you. Deeply. You're a son to me. But if you don't learn a little subtlety, I will terminate your contract."

"And waste all your hard work?"

"I'll start from scratch if necessary. You're in no fit state to run this place when I'm gone."

Florian's grip on the bodkin loosens. "When you're gone."

"Hand it over. If you don't, I'll slap a black band around your wrist and send you to Strangleroot."

Finally, the bodkin changes hands.

"Thank you. Now." The Marshal gestures toward the door. His protégé obeys, leaving a sillage of bloodwort. In the ensuing silence, Aster tries to subdue the whistle of her wheeze.

"That boy," Sorav sighs. "All sensation and no fucking sense. I can't seem to chisel away those parts of him." He rounds the desk and sits, laying his face in his hand. Suddenly, he looks older than his fortyish years, brow wrinkled, hair almost white in the lamplight. "You, I expect more from. You should've let the Tender Guard collect you last night."

"I'm sorry, Eir Patron."

"Don't lie to me, Asteritha."

"I just wasn't prepared. I didn't expect—"

"Sudden upheaval? In this city? I'll let you claim abduction this time. But the next, I'll have your wrist redecorated."

"Yes, Eir Patron."

"You picked quite the night to go gambling for a dancer." He pauses, deflates, breath framed by facets of oakmoss and leather. "Don't ever disappear on me again. I can't be caught with my guard down. Especially now. Whether this attack is real or not, the Chancellor demands I do something about it." He opens a drawer and pulls something from it. "Well, like Aufhocker says. Stability is fragile. Even eternity never lasts."

"What is that?" Aster asks. Her stomach tightens. "Oh, no. I can't."

“Of course you can. Perfume can’t serve you forever. If it didn’t protect the Chancellor, it won’t protect you.” He offers the gun, small as an egg. “Take it. Even the best hedge witches carry one.”

A bead of sweat gathers on her forehead. The weapon is antique, pre-Revival. “I—don’t—”

“You do. You’re as trained as the rest of the household. It’s only lead. It shoots where you point it, nothing more.”

Aster’s throat tightens. “Marshal…”

“It’s just a precaution.”

“If … you insist.”

“I insist.” He watches her hands shake as she opens the wooden cylinder to count the rounds. “I need fumes,” he says. “I’m going to wipe out Splinter Row.”

She lifts her eyes.

“These Neo-Repressionists have cropped up again. I’ll need a perfume for the speech afterward, too. Woody, but soft. Nothing sharp. Nothing that evokes *shredding*.”

A shiver runs down her spine. “Eir … are we … again?”

“Don’t panic. I’m only pulling a few weeds.” He reaches for her shoulder, and Aster submits to his unnerving touch. Unfailingly, she is astounded by his solidity, the gentleness of his fingers, the same that have strangled bare necks and pulled pins from ecdytoxic grenades, that have plunged effortlessly into flames, acid, fumigants, everything but the Catoptric itself. “This won’t be the Revival, Asteritha. This place can only resurrect itself so many times.”

She is unable to answer him with anything but a despondent “Yes, Eir Patron.”

“I need more mayfly in my bath oils tonight.” He squeezes the back of her neck. “I have some things I’d like to forget.”

ONE MAN'S PEST

"About time we got proper equipment," Dawn says. His new carbine slides gracefully into his hands, his armored suit fits like a second skin. At first Guy assumes it's the runes branded into their gear, but he comes to realize it's familiarity, not witchcraft, that lets Dawn handle their new instruments with such ease. Everything except the chemical ammunition is refitted military equipment, castoffs scraped up from some failed coup or another.

"The same as we used in Ostlerfell," Dawn says as he shows Guy how to load his firearm. "Only difference is the nozzle attachment."

Today their search has brought them to a midcity hoopskirt factory. It seems like another false alarm, one of the many contriver-worm hallucinations that have spread steadily outward from Conundrum. A preliminary pass of the factory reveals only a nest of giant hellrats. A cloud of BSPAF smokes them out, and they scurry between sewing machines, through trenches of scraps, almost as big as the hellrat puppets the Opera used for the devil's chorus of familiars. As they scatter, wailing like the damned, Guy's ear shakes with the high-pitched violins of *Faustech*'s overture—though it's likelier just acoustic recoil from the new carbines.

Dawn takes out the creatures with a string of silver bullets, aiming with flawless precision as they dive across grated catwalks. He watches their flinty claws spark against cellulose and iron, following the lights with his crosshairs. Gunfire cracks, and one by one they fall in plumes of sulfur.

"Hefty bastards," Three says. Her marksmanship is not as polished as Dawn's, but the rats are large, slow targets. It takes only an hour to clear the infestation. The brood-nests are burned, and the stink of brimstone begins to clear. They pile the carcasses and Dawn ferrets through them, looking for a good specimen to bring home. Cooked properly, there's no spicier meat in the city.

"Save this one," he grunts, hauling what looks like the brood-parent over his shoulder.

"Oh, so you make a face at me when I squeeze just a *drop* of mad honey from a job," Three replies, "and you're gonna bring home a whole hellrat?"

"You want a thigh or not, Captain?"

She grumbles and floods formic vitriol into her tank. "Guylag, go make sure we got them all. And set the trap while you're down there. No job unfinished, and all that."

Guy hauls the teratopod snare over his shoulder and strikes his torch. Blue light dangling at his belt, he crouches beneath the row of sewing machines and squeezes into a disposal trench. He wades shin-deep through a soup of oddments and digestive enzymes, mounting half-liquid piles of textiles and rusted equipment. He keeps an eye open for an undissolved scrap of something pretty, something bold and bright Tyro might like, since her sleeves are already in need of patching.

"'I might as well sin,'" he sings, raking a glove through the grime. A ripple meets his wrist, and he stills, listening for the shriek of a rat. Something moves just out of sight, just under the surface of the textile sludge. Carefully, he cranks open the mouth of the trap and sets it. A bright scent drifts from it, clean as Fauniche perfume. His hair stands on end, drawn up by a force not quite a sound, not quite a smell. As he scans the dark, venom resonates inside him.

"Here," he says quietly. "There's one here."

His team doesn't respond, but the teratopod does. It slithers toward him, coated in a skin of frayed fabric. Smaller, softer than its brood-parent, it barely rises above the caustic water, and still Guy shrinks at its approach, pressing against the wall and pulling his carbine from his side. His heart beats an anxious pizzicato in his ear.

The creature stills. When it opens its many mandibles and slides out a long, barbed proboscis, his trigger finger tenses, but he stays his hand. The appendage passes him by and snakes toward the trap. A strange, soft moan emanates from the blanket of scraps and threaded sequins, and Guy hears a tiny minuet, a jumbled rearrangement of Faustech's last aria before he's dropped through the hellfire chute. Terrified, poison resonating in his ear, he can't help but think the thing is repeating his own song back to him.

"Moulène! You done?"

A crack rends the air. Guy jumps, and so does the trap. He fumbles with his carbine, sure he's misfired—but when he steadies himself, lifting the barrel toward the teratopod, the metal is still cool. He squints through the flickering blue light of the torch, to see the trap has snapped shut over the creature's tongue and forelegs. The rest of it thrashes freely in the slick mire,

tail whipping, legs grasping at the walls. Guy backs up, waiting for the creature to pull the apparatus apart and turn its attention to him—yet after a few seconds of contortion, the worm goes still. Guy's heart, finally, slows.

"You're not gonna get any of this hellrat when we get back," Three calls.

He waits for a second before answering. "I caught one."

"What?" Her silhouette hunches over the grate. "Speak up."

"I caught one!"

"Caught what? Another raccoon?" She disappears, then with a creak and hiss of her arm, heaves the grate away. A rope descends, and she after it. "What are you mewling about, Guy?"

She falls silent when she sees the teratopod, motionless but for a few undulations of spiracles. She wraps a hand around his belt, pulling him away from the creature. "Shit, you all right?" she hisses. "You bit?"

"I'm good," he breathes.

She releases him. "Well. Honestly, I expected more theatrics from you."

Dawn drops down after her. The moment his feet hit the sludge, the trap bumps, and the creature's tail whips.

"God!" Three flinches. "Have some *grace,* Corporal—spook it and we'll have another Incident."

Dawn looks over the thing, its absurd size, its patchwork quilt of scraps. "Shit," he breathes. "I thought it went *in* the trap."

"You'd think," Three sighs. "All right, boys, go find a phone and call Bert. R&D is gonna want to sweep the place before they dispose of this thing."

"You're going to stay?" Dawn asks.

"Yeah. Gotta take a few field notes. Documentation, crossing my eyes and dotting my tees and all that." She steps back, watching the creature's despondent twitching. "Be quick with that call, will you? Then take the rest of the shift."

"Are you sure, Captain?" Dawn asks.

"You wanna change my mind? You don't want the afternoon off?"

"We want the afternoon off," Guy says shakily.

"Good. Save a piece of hellrat for me." She pulls her tank from her back and drops it on an island of machine parts. "Medium rare."

"Of course, Captain," Dawn says.

He grabs the rope and hauls himself back up through the grate. Before Guy follows, he glances back at Three, who shakes her head as she digs through one of her tank's auxiliary sacs. "God, boys," she mutters. "I think I oughta retire."

They crawl back up onto the factory floor and gather their equipment. Dawn, already burdened with his tank, hauls the hellrat carcass over his shoulder. They make their way back into the tunneled streets of the midcity, where Guy finds a public sap-line. After he makes the call, he and Dawn descend past rows of flickering green streetlamps, past factory tenements, and into the midcity shipyards, always dark but always lively. Foremen patrol the stairwells, watching carpenters and alchemists work the city's innards, cutting huge planks from the hardwood. A few stray children follow Dawn as he walks past with his rat, teasing, begging, insulting his mother in the hopes he'll tear off a leg and toss it at them.

The atmosphere of the roots is blessedly fresh compared to the midcity. Afternoon mist spills through the tangled catwalks, carrying a broken tune. One of the children has followed them, Guy assumes, until he recognizes the Autotomic Brigade's airy march. Dawn, for the first time in many months, is whistling.

"Pleased with your catch?" Guy asks.

"No," Dawn grunts. "Yours." That seems enough explanation for him; he falls silent as they cross the fungal bridge toward the barracks.

"Talk to me, Corporal," Guy says.

Dawn takes another few seconds to answer. "I … just can't quite believe that thing."

"Neither can I," Guy admits.

"This is … something new. Something that matters. Not just another termite. Not another inconvenience to sweep back under a rug." He glances over his shoulder. "This seems real."

He lays a solemn weight on the word. It's one he uses rarely, usually only when he returns from one of his bad episodes, when Dawn draws back to reveal what is left of Flint, raw and tense and wordless for hours on end. The look on his face now, solid, *present,* both relieves and unnerves Guy.

"It is real," he says, because he can say nothing else.

The Root of Joyous Healing comes into view. The activity of R&D hums across the void, welding sparks illuminating the smoky haze like lightning in a storm cloud. When they drop onto the gangway to the barracks with their prize, their compeers emerge from the woodwork. Margot offers some of her famously rancid sink-brewed lager in exchange for a hind leg, and Bell, already up to her neck in debt ink, offers a generous IOU for the liver. Dawn ignores them, dropping the rat by Three's workshop and drawing his knife.

"Go find Ty," he says. "It's about time she learned to skin something. If she wants to use a razor, she ought to use a knife, too."

Guy shrugs off his tank. "You gonna make a butcher out of her?"

"Better a butcher than a thumb-twiddler."

He unbuckles his collar and peels the plates from his shoulders. Wrapping his iron-vine arms around his waist, he crosses the planks to their sleeping quarters and creaks open the door. Afternoon light spills across the apartment, the tiny table, the kitchenette, settling on Tyro's back, hunched over the washbasin.

Guy freezes. "Ty?" he says quietly.

Razor clutched in one hand, a clump of hair in the other, she meets his eyes in the rusty mirror. Curls lie at her feet, and a thin red line runs from a nick on her temple, past her ear, her cheek, to her clenched jaw. A sound catches in her throat, and her face reddens. She turns, drops his razor, and begins, silently, to cry.

Guy stands in the doorway, one leg in, one leg out, unsure which way he should run. He knows his sister's tears; he knows which are pain and which sadness and which rage. This soundless weeping is entirely alien to him. He has never seen such exquisite guilt on her face before.

He opens his mouth but can't force anything out. He has a hundred questions and can't choose which to ask first.

"Oh, princeling," he says eventually.

She bites her lip. When she speaks, it's in a strained whisper.

He steps into the apartment and gently closes the door. "I can't hear you, Ty."

"I said," she rasps, "are you gonna help me or what?"

He breaks, releasing a chuckle. "Sure. Can't let you make it any worse." He fetches the razor from the floor and brushes back her curls, revealing the nicks on her ear and forehead. "There's blood on your collar, Ty. Here. Take this off."

"No."

"No?"

"You'll stare."

"I won't stare." He pulls a stray hair from her shoulder. "Has someone been staring?"

She says nothing. Reluctantly, she removes her dress.

"Who's been staring, Ty?"

"Rickhardt. A little."

"He's not giving you those drawings again, is he?"

"No."

"Three will talk to him." He looks over her head, assessing the damage. "Scissors'll be much better for this. I'll get some." Tyro latches to him, gripping his sleeve, unwilling to let him go. He sighs, gives in, and turns her toward the mirror. "'Little poet,'" he sings, "'dry your eyes and whet your blade.'"

"My eyes are dry."

"Sure they are." He slices through her terrible handiwork, avoiding the cuts and clotted blood. "God, you did a number on yourself, grease-beetle."

"I didn't feel it," she says.

"Of course not." When their mother had cut their hair, rough and desperate, he had always wept. Tyro never flinched. "Your skull's iron. That's why it's so fucking thick."

"What?"

"Iron. You're iron." Across the barracks, he can hear Dawn holler for him. He ignores him. "Half, at least. On your dad's side. He was an oil drum, you know."

"No he wasn't."

"It's true. When our mam worked in Textile Crack, they kept these oil drums full of silkworms on the factory floor, where they bred them. She found you in one of them, after the night shift. The one on the end of the line. Worse for wear but still sturdy—that was your dad. You were the biggest silkworm he ever grew. And the prettiest."

"Stupid," Tyro mutters. She quiets for a minute, listening to the short scrapes of the razor. "What about yours? What was your dad?"

"An awl. A rusty awl." He adjusts her chin. "You know, our mam was so good with her scissors that sometimes she took them to the Root of Broken Teeth and fought with them for money. She had a pair the size of my arm. She could fend off swordsmen and blacksmiths and carvers, easy. So one night she's fighting this cobbler, and he's her match. Just as tough, just as mean. Every time she's got him between her blades, he parries with a shoehorn. When he swings a leather sole she spears it with a seam-ripper.

"They're stuck like that for a while. Neither of them ever fight fair, that's why it's even. Then one day, he gets her with his

awl, right in the belly. Part of the metal breaks off in there, but she doesn't know until it swells up and she goes to the doctor."

"She didn't take it out?"

"No. Dunno why. Maybe she wanted it. Maybe she wanted to show off the scar. Either way, it grew and grew and eventually I came out. Then she went right back to the trade. Kept up her duel with the cobbler, on and off for eight years or so. Until she landed the finishing blow with a pair of fabric shears."

Tyro digests this for a moment. "Bullshit," she says.

"Bullshit or not, it's true." He slices away the last of her loose hair, then runs his hands through it, short and greasy. "Now, go help Dawn. He's gonna teach you to skin a hellrat."

"You got a hellrat?"

"And a dragon. Maybe you can see it when they bring it down to R&D."

This, more than anything, puts a smile on her face. She pulls on her dress, runs her hands through her curls, and runs her feet out the door.

When she is gone, Guy drops to his knees, gathers her hair, and salvages what he can for sale.

AFTERNOON RIVERSCAPE WITH BOAT

The belligerent days of Acid Moon creep from the mountains in threads of purple mist. The heat thickens with the clouds, and intercorporate rivalries rekindle as the fiscal year begins anew. Duels are fought, bankruptcies contested. Neo-Repressionism makes a modest comeback in the galleries on Splinter Row, which are summarily fumigated and condemned. The Opera is cleaned out from the rafters to hell, but it does nothing to wash away the rumors proliferating in the wake of *The Lilies.* Tales of poisoned wine abound, of weaponized insects, of the growing threat of Extemporist art, of the avant-garde rake Demetrius Prophet trying to kill the Chancellor—or saving his life, because, like any worthy baritone, he refused to be upstaged by disaster.

In an effort to maintain a façade of normalcy, the bridal luncheon proceeds as planned, or as the Chancellor planned, on his personal riverboat, the *Clevette.* The old liner, born as a luxury cruiser but having lived most of its life as a smuggling ship, has been fully restored for leisure (including Elspeth's badminton court, an expensive act of diplomacy her fiancé plans to hold against her for years to come). The vessel is berthed on the south side of the city, below the Root of Broken Teeth, where the long brass lifts deposit her guests directly onto her deck.

The elevator clings to the city's steepest precipice, where the tenements balance on brass cantilevers. Affectionately called the birdcage since its days as an execution device, it offers a straight shot to the outermost docks. Aster and Florian accompany their patron as the elevator creaks downward, lurching and stalling as it cuts a path through unruly vines and bird's nests. There's little the operators can do about the overgrowth until the rains come.

"I met with Demetrius," the Marshal says, almost cheerfully. Aster has adorned him with a veneer of amicability today, a pheromone that gets him remembered for his perfect politeness—at the cost of him forgetting most of what he says. A price he gladly pays.

"I hope he was all you had expected," Aster says.

"Pleasant enough, for a theater creature. I want him again next week."

Aster bites her lip. "The Chancellor is making noise about sponsoring him—"

"Outbid him. Gorslung can wait."

Beside her, Florian burns under his perfume. Embarrassed, or envious (Aster can never tell), he fixes his eyes over the river valley, on the silver gash the Catoptric has carved down its middle, verdancy swelling on either shore.

"Do you have your stinger with you?" Sorav asks.

She pats her purse, rattling her pills and perfume bottles against her tiny gun. She feels no safer with it, but she does seem that way, which arguably is preferable. Feeling is subjective. Seeming requires some sort of outside consensus.

"I want you to come to me if you smell anything amiss today," Sorav says. "Either of you."

"It's only a bridal luncheon," says Florian.

"It'll start that way. But assassination attempts seem to be in vogue this season."

"It'd be a stupid time to try it. Trapped on a ship with all the Chancellor's friends."

Sorav glances at him. "Do you know the best way to draw out a malcontent, Florian? You put all his fish in one barrel."

The car rattles to a halt a dozen paces from the water. A gangplank extends from the *Clevette*'s second terrace; it hooks to the birdcage, and the door opens.

"Don't embarrass me today," Sorav says, and steps onto the gangplank.

He makes his way across the deck, tails of his formalwear diffusing his scent. He greets the ministerium, the industrialists, the bridesmaids, leaving only a whiff of resentment under his unassailable dignity. As he squeezes the hands of his most despised friends, Aster wonders how many fusillades it would take to stop him if he chose, on a whim, to kill all of them. Sometimes, on his worst nights, he will admit the only thing holding him back is the burden of cleaning up the mess.

Aster checks the Marshal's position in her pocket mirror, then the Chancellor's, then makes her way to the bar. She's not halfway there before someone grabs her shoulder and delivers a wet kiss to her cheek. Elspeth smells of lavender today, armed with a slim racket and a white skirt. A scorpion tail is twisted in her hair, secured with a band of ivory.

"You should've come dressed to play," she says, though she knows Aster will not get halfway across a court of any kind without coughing up some sort of mutant glob.

"It's too hot," Aster says. "I think I'll swim instead."

Elspeth laughs, then leans forward, nudging a nearby bridesmaid away with the tip of her racket. "I invited him for you."

"Who?" Aster asks, though Elspeth has made it more than clear. She wears the same grin she wore at the Sanitarium whenever she'd push her dolls' mouths together.

"I'll send him over when I'm done with him," she says, and glides back into the crowd. A few minutes later, drink in hand, Aster follows, squeezing through the verbal and olfactory conversations, the kind of lush pleasantries that can only be exchanged between the deeply unpleasant. She situates herself on a bench by the makeshift court. Florian lounges on the sidelines, eyes locked on Elspeth's opponent.

Mallory removes a jacket only half as hideous as all his others and takes his racket from the ball boy. In his antique blouse and silk shoes, he looks like a garish mistake in an otherwise masterful tableau, a Merrett-style eyesore among the pointillist exactitude of a vant Wron picnicscape. Even in the mounting Acid Moon heat, he doesn't roll up his sleeves to serve.

Elspeth responds with perfect form, her veneer of scents smoothing each of her movements, slowing and fanning out the shuttlecock right before it hits her racket. An elegant cheat, and if Aster knows the perfumers at the Chancellery, named something dismal like "Poetry in Motion."

The ship eases out from the gnarled fingers of Tiliard's roots. The curve of the city bends against the violet sky, crosshatched with brass lifts and mossy stairwells. Aster rarely gets this view of the vertical meadows, the curled rootlets remolded by ecdytoxin. She is so used to being safely penned in by rings of streets, by the labyrinths of the midcity below her and the blanket of pollen-haze above. It almost frightens her, to see the city so small, this helpless mote of civilization under the sky's endless pink maw.

She steadies herself with a sip of her cocktail. As she watches Elspeth and Mallory play, one like a stanza of metered verse, the other like an honest, if not funny, slip of the tongue, she digs through her memory for all the things he's said, and all the things he hasn't. Sweating in the wet heat, she tries to pick through the web of half-truths woven around him, untangling threads of reality from her own guesswork.

Something foul hovers behind her. She turns, expecting a urea wasp.

"Dearest Asteritha," the Chancellor says. "So nice to see you've made it."

"Eir Chancellor, what a pleasure," Aster replies. "I hope you've recovered from your ordeal."

"Thank you, vralen. Doing much better."

When he sits beside her, it becomes clear he is not. She can't see it under his glove, or his sleeve, but there is something wrong with his arm. No perfume curls up from his wrist. His regalia, a skillful concoction of a hundred scents that hide a hundred others, falls short just below his elbow: an abrupt, offensive incompleteness that the other guests have surely noticed, if only subconsciously.

"It's bad, isn't it?" the Chancellor sighs. "You're good enough to smell that. Probably good enough to fix it, Mam'selle Fauniche." He leans back, crossing one shining shoe over the other. "Yes, yes, I know. Your contract. I was thinking of just cutting my hand off for the wedding. A silver prosthetic would look good, wouldn't it? Like the lead from *Tulip Food*."

"Nothing's impossible with a good bioalchemist," Aster says.

"So true. Grab me my snuff, would you, dear? The hand isn't much good at the moment."

Before she can even process his request, she fishes the snuffbox from his jacket pocket.

"I hate to ask this," his tongue continues, breath layered in scents. "Just a little on your thumb. Good girl. Don't let me make a mess."

Scolding herself, she obeys. When he's done, he drapes his good arm on the back of Aster's chair and watches his fiancée's game.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" he asks eventually.

Elspeth's muscles pull taut in the purple cloud-light. Her bob curls in the humidity, cupping her flushed cheeks. "Absolutely," Aster sighs.

"It took nearly eight years to refurbish her. I had to get all the materials hauled up from the sludge pits. Used to be a smuggling ship, did you know?"

"Oh. Yes. She's lovely."

He shifts, eyeing the match. "That man losing to my bride. Vant Pallont, was it?"

"Passand."

"I've noticed he's fond of parading around naked. Charming, but bold, in this climate. At least he has no perfume that can mask his lustful intentions toward my bride."

"I don't think he has any such intentions, Chancellor," she says carefully.

"Nonsense—he's nude, not blind." He watches the match for a few seconds. "Oh. She's a bold cheater, isn't she?"

Aster hesitates, certain someone must've noticed a missing hairpin in her boudoir. "Surely not—"

"At badminton, dear. Unless you have a secret to spill."

"No, Eir Chancellor."

"Good. That's a match I'd rather not see him win." He laughs. "He is odd, isn't he? I wonder who his barber is. I've never seen a man with so smooth a shave. I'm still looking for someone skilled to trim me for my wedding night. So ask him for me."

Mallory forfeits with grace, but it's Elspeth who gives up the racket, throwing it to Florian. He catches it, flinching as if stung by the memory of his appropriated bodkin. Then he turns to Mallory, eyeing his opponent with eager malice. If not swords, rackets will do.

Elspeth trots over to her betrothed, slips onto his lap, and leans in for a long kiss. Aster can't help but notice her back arching to avoid the hand reaching around to stroke it. By the time their tongues and perfumes disentangle, Mallory has already served the next match.

"Done already?" the Chancellor asks. "You *howled* for that court."

"Well, I was about to break a sweat."

"God forbid you sweat in your exercise gear."

"Yes, well, it's *white*—we've had a conversation about this." A shout emanates from the court. Florian dives, racket outstretched, and misses. "Speaking of. I have something to ask the Seamstress Laureate about my dress."

"I'm not letting you wear that green thing," he says. "Not to my wedding."

"*Your* wedding? Who are you marrying, dear?"

"I told you already. Glow-snail shells and stage lights don't mix. You weren't there for *Sons and Brothers,* but believe me, it was explosive."

"It'll be fine. Mallory has offered to make alterations."

"Yes, yes—" He rolls his eyes toward Aster. "Embroidery is back all of a sudden. I know."

"It's practically the only thing I can see," Elspeth says. "He makes all sorts of things, dear. He could make you a lovely cravat for the wedding."

"Is he contracted?"

"No, he's a free man. For now. Rumor has it more than one patron is considering courting him." She slides off his lap as a second round begins. A ring of spectators has gathered around the game, less interested in the display of mediocre skill than of Florian unraveling. Each missed strike sends his perfume searing with light.

"I'll think about it," the Chancellor says. "And that reminds me—Aster, tell your master to keep his paws off Demetrius Prophet. Don't you dare let him outbid me again."

"I'll try my best," Aster mumbles.

Florian shouts from the court as Mallory's birdie thwarts him once more. Bloodwort burgeons through his top notes, and when his next serve fails him, he turns from the court. Because he cannot beat Mallory, he beats the ball boy instead. He swings at the kid, breaking the racket's frame against his shoulder with a shallow crack. The boy falls, curls, and covers his head while Florian twists the handle around on flaccid strings. The racket snaps again, neck splintering from the handle.

"Hey!" the Chancellor calls. "Oh, for God's sake." He stands. "Marshal! Leash your fucking animal!"

Mallory steps forward, reaching to his side for a weapon that isn't there, but by the time he makes his way across the court, Florian has already thrown the remains of the racket over the gunwale and marched back into the crowd. A few Crypsis agents, cloaked in outrageous costume and subtle perfume, follow him.

"*Tawdry,*" the Chancellor growls, and, arm around Elspeth's, disappears into the buzz of scandalized whispers.

Mallory helps the ball boy to his feet, shaken but unhurt. He's red in the face, mostly flattered at the sudden, if not passionate, attention. Mallory dusts him off, then gathers his jacket and approaches Aster.

"Nice lad," he says darkly. "You really serve the same patron?"

"Who are you to judge, Mal? Are you the only good man in Tiliard?"

"Definitely not. But I do know him."

She frowns, unsure if that's the line that comes next. She hasn't seen Porrain in an age. "Any luck with your search, Eir vant Passand?"

"Some. I have a lead, but we'll see where it goes." His eyes flit to the Chancellor, politely avoiding handshakes among the crowd. "Strange wound on that one."

"You can smell it?"

"Sort of. It seems off." He smiles. "Like it might be spreading."

"It's a bite of some kind, I heard. Though no one knows from what. He seems to think someone planted—oh, Eir Patron."

The Marshal steps before them, a wall of stark, sanitary white. "Vant Passand, I presume," he says. "The Chancellor informs me I must apologize on behalf of my hireling."

"Oh. Eir Marshal. Not to me…" He trails off, glancing to where the ball boy last stood. "I'm … That's quite all right. Pleasure. Such a pleasure. Truly." Nerves thicken his accent, and despite his smile, there's no hiding the tremor in his extended

hand.

Sorav doesn't take the offer. "They tell me you kidnapped my perfumer."

"Oh, it wasn't nearly as exciting as that." He drops his glove. Like many who greet the Marshal, he does not look at his eyes, but the glinting medals at his heart. "I'll be sure to ransom her next time."

"Wise. She is worth quite a bit to me." A small frown appears on his face. "Eir vant Passand, we've met, haven't we? Aren't … No, you're too young to have fought in Ostlerfell."

"I was."

"But we have met."

"Yes, Eir Marshal."

"I'm afraid I don't recall."

"Understandable. I was only one of many boys you met that day. You came to Mongfestun a few years after the Revival. Spoke to my graduating class."

"Ah, yes, the reformatory by the lake." The Marshal's formal note of bastion rose evaporates, leaving a scent of kinderflower. "No one else makes soldiers quite like they do."

"You shook each and every one of our hands. You gave me my saber, looked me in the eye, and said my thumb name." His voice falters. "I was in a dark place, then. You restored me. Genuinely. You gave me hope."

"I'm … honored you found the event so inspiring." Sorav steps back, drinking in his style, his open, honest look. His perfume churns as he tries to reconcile Mallory's thin frame with the exemplar of a Mongfestun military man. "Did you serve after your release?"

"No. Got some work guarding the vineyards in Dagdrun. Escorted caravans up and down the Sawteeth for a few years. Nothing heroic."

"A pity. The Palas could use men with discipline." His brow furrows. "Where did you say you were from, Eir vant Passand?"

"I didn't."

Someone cries out near the bow. The Marshal surveys the deck. Another scream emerges from the crowd, and a hoot of laughter. A scuffle breaks out nearby, angry clouds of perfume erupting over a cluster of feathered hats. Aster recognizes the stench, the bloody, wild odor breaking through Florian's olfactory constraints. The Marshal's successor, it appears, has started something.

"Excuse me," Sorav growls. His scent curdles, and for a second Aster is terrified that he is less angry with Florian's outburst than with her inability to suppress it. She grips Mallory's arm, instinct pulling him close, as if he has any chance of defending her.

The Marshal says nothing more, turning toward the crowd with a hand on his saber hilt. He freezes when a raindrop falls on his shoulder. It hisses against his uniform, leaving a snake of steam in its wake. Someone squeals nearby, and the crowd shifts toward the canopies. The cloud of Florian's perfume sputters and dies, and Aster breathes a sigh of relief.

Sorav knows better than to glance upward. Instead, he looks back at Aster, then turns on his heel. A few minutes later, the call to retreat belowdecks is made. The first rains of Acid Moon have come early.

★ ★ ★

As the *Clevette* makes her way back to Tiliard, Elspeth paces her length, apologizing for both the inclement weather and the ugliness of the badminton match. She wears a resentful grin, though Aster can see a spark of cheer in it.

"Don't worry, Vralen Schölin," a bridesmaid tells her. "There's still the potluck, and the dinner banquet, and the high tea—"

"How much does that woman eat?" Mallory mutters.

"Very little," Aster replies, "considering how much she's served."

They lounge in an open stateroom as lunch is passed out on the middeck. Quarters are cramped. Perfumes and conversations and motives seep into one another; sycophants congratulate and console the bride, conspiracies blend with pleasantries, threats diffuse into the miasma of flattery. Near the stern, Florian's indignant hollers barrage the doors of his locked cabin. The jazz band valiantly tries to drown him out, while up top the rain hardens to hail. Icy pellets hit the deck in thunderous drumrolls, and the Catoptric with no noise at all.

"Do they have much of this in the countryside?" Aster asks Mallory.

"Hail? In Dagdrun, sometimes. Never in Mongfestun. It barely rains there."

"Don't you need the acidity?"

"Not really. The place is barren. Too far from the Catoptric. Even the lake is lifeless enough to swim in."

"To *swim* in," Aster chuckles.

"It is. During Hound Moon we'd dive for old porcelain. Works by Dresden and such. Anything the officers could pawn off."

Aster finishes her meal to the pleasant distraction of Mallory's charming, if not dubious, storytelling. He describes the lake as a quarry, rocky shores infested with naked military boys, but she still sees it as Rebau did when he painted it, a kaleidoscope of orange water contorting a castle in its ripples. The more he speaks of the bald mountainside, the more the stateroom and all its idle chatter seem suffocating.

"Can we go?" she whispers. "I can't breathe down here."

He takes her hand and they make their way up the stairs. Amid the hail-rattled umbrellas and broken glass, they find an abandoned sunshade sturdy enough for shelter. A dozen paces astern, several of Elspeth's bridesmaids bathe in the hail, exfoliating in red sheets. Their skin will be smooth as glass, once the bruises clear.

Aster turns from the girls and leans on the golden railing. She coughs a few times, steadily but heartily, until she deposits a streak of blood onto his handkerchief.

Mallory rubs between her shoulder blades, gently as Elspeth. "You're worsening, Vost."

"Always this bad," she lies, fumbling in her purse for her pills.

"That's quite a bit of blood."

"You want me to sing in your arms about it?"

"If that comforts you." He leans over the balustrade as she shakes her bottle. She swallows half a dozen pills, then applies a touch of medicinal perfume to her trachea.

"Aster…" Mallory starts. "How did you get…"

"Fumes. BGS grenades. I was in a taxi. We got caught up in the Overture Skirmish."

He watches her shake out a cigarette. "Inhalation is a bad route."

"Could be worse," she answers. "Hard to hide, though. Elspeth has it easier. You can't even tell she's contaminated unless she cries. And she never cries."

He takes her offered cigarette and leans to let her light it. "I've heard the ear is the worst."

"Oh, no. That'll be oral ingestion. Ones who drank the untreated water, or who ate sewer meat during the shortages. Hideous things. And the *appetites* they had. True vermin."

"Ecdytoxin can really change you." He brings his smoke to his mouth, and Aster's heart hiccups.

"What about you, vant Passand?"

"What about me?"

"How did you get contaminated?"

He ashes into the Catoptric. "Stung."

"*Stung?*" She reexamines him for the dozenth time since they've met, taking in his oddities, his normalcies, his little scars. There is nothing particularly monstrous about him, at least on the surface. "Straight from the source, then?"

"I told you. I was an exterminator."

"An exterminator *and* a Mongfestun graduate? You had a busy youth, Eir vant Passand."

Two columns of smoke emerge from his nose. "It's a long story."

"Longer than a cigarette, I know."

He says nothing for a while. Hailstones disappear soundlessly into the river, as if into a cloud. A bridesmaid whimpers from the bow. "Do you blame him?" he asks eventually.

"Blame who?"

"The Marshal. Do you blame him for what happened to you?"

"I … I can't."

A shadow darkens his gold eyes. "Forgiveness is in the terms of your contract?"

"Not at all. Maybe some of what he did back then was in poor taste … but he's better than the rest. He took me out of—" She hesitates, half tempted to go into the torture of the Sanitarium, the brutal treatments, the lavages. The Chancellor's eyes watching his crop of new citizens grow, the click of his polished shoes as he walked down the line of survivors, picking out those whose afflictions showed potential, deciding what strife-sown seeds would beget great beauty. "The Marshal treats me like a daughter," she says. "He's a good patron. I owe everything to him."

Mallory sighs, raising his eyes as Tiliard resolves in the distance. "Me too, I suppose. Without him, I would still be moving from job to job, gathering tattoos up to my neck. I wouldn't be standing on a goddamn riverboat."

"His graduation speech was that inspiring?"

"It was awful. Not a single war story. And this was the man who got shot in the head by the Marshal Exultant and just spat out the bullet."

"Is that what they say about him at Mongfestun?"

"That, and when he looks at the sun, the sun goes blind."

“Well, see, that one is true.” She flicks her butt away. “He’d never admit it, though. He never talks about his life. And he’s shot anyone who’s tried to write a biography. You should see what he did to the librettist of *Deep Canyon*.”

Mallory laughs. “He never was fond of pageantry.”

Aster’s gut turns. “Mal,” she starts, thinks better of it, then discards that better thought. “This person you’re looking for. All this debt business. If it’s got something to do with the Marshal…”

She doesn’t finish, and he doesn’t finish for her. He stares into the Catoptric, and a little thrill of terror lights her heart.

“You know,” she continues carefully, glancing to the Guardsmen pacing the stern. “You’re not the first. We used to get an avenger every few seasons. Sons of deposed ministers. People who lost family in the Revival. Debtors, sometimes. Or just fanatics who want the Marshal’s attention. Some might try to kill him for it. Some may even try to get to him through his perfumer.”

“Give yourself more credit, vralen. I really do like you.” A cautious smile parts his lips. He turns to the water and takes a long, final drag. “Though it worked, didn’t it? I just got a much clearer view of his heart than his last assassin.”

“Well, go ahead, vant Passand. Try it. By all means. And you will very much have to resort to *all* means.” Her laugh catches in her throat. “He might appreciate the gesture, if you’re clever about it. He might even wear your skull when he’s done with you.”

Mallory glances at her. “He’s not the one I’m after, vralen. He’s only in the way.”

“In the way of what?”

He says nothing, only flicks his butt overboard.

She watches the filter spiral down into the water, and as she returns her cigarette case to her purse, her fingers brush her firearm. “You know I could get you killed,” she whispers. “I could scream. Right now. They’d toss you into the river, no questions asked.”

“You could,” he admits. “But then you’ll never get answers to your own.”

His boldness bewilders her; she has spent so many years watching the Marshal crush usurpers, conspirators, entire movements, sometimes by each individual windpipe. None of those roaches was brash enough to crawl under the boot and dare it to stomp.

“Now’s your chance,” Mallory says, eyeing the Guardsmen. “You could get rid of me. Prove you’re a pleasure and not a pest.”

“I might,” she says softly.

“They’re looking our way, vralen. We’re being suspicious up here, whispering so intimately.”

She removes her hand from her purse and directs it instead to his embroidered collar. “We’d better kiss, then,” she says.

“Am I going to get tackled by those Guards over there?”

“If you’re willing to find out, you’ve got about four seconds.”

“I’ll take it,” he says, and does.

SONS AND BROTHERS

All of them are brought back alive. One by one, undulating and sedated in their traps, the teratopods are subdued and removed by the brave men and women of Borisch-Gorslung Extermination Company. From the depths of Splinter Row to the highest manors of Fog Hill, the pests are loaded onto rumbling lorries and transported to R&D for disposal.

Calls flood the barracks. Word—and therefore sightings—of the contriver worm spread from the roots to the overcity, infesting buildings, envenomating the piping, tending their blooming, fractal nests. For every hundred false alarms, there is one teratopod. Each is extracted from a unique nest of grotesquerie, cavities bored from the flesh of the city: wood, wiring, marble, paint, life. The creature spares no stratum; it's just as likely to be found in a minister's private bathhouse as burrowing through a septic rootlet. It is a versatile sculptor, molding its surroundings according to its verminous tastes. One is discovered in the fountain at Hart Park, when the marble cherubs begin to piss a frightening shade of red. Another is captured in a vat on the Root of Brewers, sowing its lair with a toxic, incandescent yeast. A third is found terrorizing the jewelers of Bast Street, stinging four policemen and leaving clusters of ruby flesh blooming in each splayed chest cavity.

Sreckt and a few lesser companies begin their own hunt for the centipedal culprit of the Conundrum Incident, to clear their name or outdo their rival. They meet with no success—only false alarms and fatalities. Even their state-of-the-art implements, pumped up from their midcity factories, are ineffective. True to the immortal creature from the ballet, the contriver worm is immune to conventional assaults. It will endure, grow, reassemble, recombine—and in the coming months, warns Bertram, when those left uncaptured reach maturity, reproduce.

Just one company seems capable of removing the pest, armed with specialized traps and armor and, in one hireling's case, a good ear for teratopod toxin. The humble outfit, hatched from the gutted shell of Borisch & Sons, comprising a few dozen exterminators and a few dozen ancillary staff, emerges as the only bulwark against the infestation.

Borisch-Gorslung swiftly becomes a household name; the payments are generous, the thanks effusive, even for the Whittleston infestations and mantises and other mundanities. Three and Guy greedily apportion the tips, and Dawn, after so many years being denied the due for his heroism, gets to bask in a little well-earned adoration. He does so with perfect dignity, offering a humble smile when clients show him his photograph in the *Lunar Herald,* not in his Brigade uniform but the iron vine of Borisch & Sons, dragging his comrade out from the wreckage of the Conundrum Incident.

"People are afraid," says Bertram Gorslung in the interview that accompanies the photograph. "City services have failed them. The Incident has been years in the making. Not even my own uncle's hands are clean. The Cabinet is so busy playing with their new pigments they've neglected basic infrastructure. This place has been infested for a long time, and it goes from the deepest roots all the way to the Chancellery."

"You're not just talking about some bug," responds the journalist.

Bertram, it's reported, has a soft, unpretentious laugh. "Would you like me to sing it for you?"

Three brings copies of the papers to the bathhouse at week's end, for both entertainment and wastepaper. Guy carries them for her as she detaches her arm and sinks into the water.

"Making the best of his situation, isn't he?" she says. "Our boy's got ambition. Moulène, help me out so I can read you the good bits."

Guy holds the pages open. His hands are otherwise unoccupied, since Tyro has decided that with her hair gone, so is the need to wash it. She sits at the edge of the tub, and when the boys from Orphanwell climb by, adamant they can kill their own contriver worm, she ascends the vines to join them. Rickhardt, a few pitchers over, averts two black eyes when she scrambles over his head.

"Tyro!" Guy calls after her. "God. Greasy little shit."

"Oh, let her go," Three says. "It's a phase. It'll pass."

"She'll get herself stung."

"Kid's just at that stage. They go to sleep tame, wake up feral."

"You're thinking of sewer foxes, Three."

"You never went through similar? Just a clean molt into adulthood for you?" She motions for him to turn the page. "Look at this. Bert's really going for it. Sniping everyone in the Cabinet. Even our dear Dramaturge Laureate—'A hack who couldn't write a coherent grocery list.' Is that true, Poet-King?"

Guy shrugs. “I don’t mind him.”

“And look, Corporal, he’s got one for your sworn enemy.”

This draws Dawn’s attention. He moves behind Three, where he’s immediately pressed into scrubbing her back.

“‘You’d think,’” she quotes, “‘after conducting one in Ostlerfell, the Grand Marshal would be able to recognize a pestilent occupation when he sees it.’”

Dawn releases a quiet chuckle. “He’s not going to make any friends.”

“He’s not trying to. Get my bad shoulder, Dawn. He knows the game. He knows it so well he’s comfortable playing it like a lunatic. If he were anyone else I’d say he’d be cruising for a Catoptric baptism. May just be the stupidest man alive. Or the only smart one. The only smart man in Tiliard.”

“I think the line is the only good man in Tiliard,” Guy says.

“Please, Moulène. There are no good men in Tiliard.”

★ ★ ★

New additions to *The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species* appear every year or so, new editions every five or six. The barracks’ population of books has been in steady equilibrium for a century, governed by the decay of bent spines and sap-glue, sewn and torn and sewn again. Entry 399 is an early arrival, tumbling down the company chutes by the first frosty squint of Martyr’s Moon.

It’s a yeast this time, or something like it, an incandescent biofilm born in the nest of teratopod toxin on the Root of Brewers. Half of the calls to Borisch-Gorslung lately are complaints about it. Deprived of its original cultivator, colonies of the stuff have been creeping steadily outward from the root, from bath drains and gutters and keg spigots. Fortunately, a good dose of yellow azole seems to do the trick, a discovery made by Margot and her bunkmate when, during an attempt to brew some in their sink, it crawled free and began to devour the apartment.

“I’ve been wondering when they were going to add that one to the books,” Dawn says, gathering the mushrooms sprouting from the cracks under the window. “Did you remember to go to Occupational Health today?”

“Yeah,” Guy mutters from the table, creaking open his *Manual.* It had been a short visit; Dr. Nic had been uncharacteristically chipper, her needle gliding into his arm without backtracks, pit stops, or missed veins, accidental or punitive. Either she recently decided to acquire knowledge of human anatomy or had come to work sober. Guy can’t decide which unnerves him more. “Quack nearly drained me. I think she’s selling the extra blood to hedge witches.”

Dawn sighs, salting the hellrat broth. “She has her own debts to pay.”

Guy unfolds entry 399. Because photography cannot capture the biofilm’s striking colors, Rickhardt has supplied an oil pastel instead. In the margins of the picture, in the watery curtains of mold, Guy can make out the shape of a melody. Voices spiral in his ear, flashes of choreography dart across the words on the page. An overture thrums into being, but it’s not Drovick, nor Vrenecker, nor Tasarte, but something Guy doesn’t recognize.

As he sews in the latest entry, a setting unfolds in his skull. Years peel back, thousands of them, to the days before the fallowing of the world. Tiliard regrows, extending through the stratosphere with a canopy so vast the hours are kept by noting which branches hold the sun like a bright fruit. On the prosperous Branch of Lilies, twin princes vie for power against a backdrop of fungal castles and leaf-sailed airships. The set is fantastic, the music even more so. The melodies ring clear in his mind, but tonight, his audience is nowhere to be found.

“Have you seen Ty?” he asks.

“No,” Dawn says. Armed with his red oven mitts, he pulls the broth from the stove and delivers it to the table. “Probably out ruining those trousers you bought her.”

“Probably,” Guy sighs.

Dawn dishes out dinner, then eats in an almost provocative silence, eschewing any words about discipline or responsibility or those other virtues the Autotomic Brigade beat into him. Even with—or especially with—tense matters, he rarely finds words adequate. The man doesn’t even talk about Broken Horse, except in fretful sleep.

“Talk to me, Corporal,” Guy says eventually.

Dawn takes another spoonful. “You can’t keep this up forever.”

“Keep what up?” Guy asks, though he already knows.

“Keep *her* up. Let her sign on with someone. With Borisch, at least.”

“No.”

“She’ll be nearby. She’ll be safe—not running around with those boys from Orphanwell. And you won’t have to—the things you do for her, Guy. The people you…”

“Don’t start,” Guy mutters.

"The company can feed her. Give her clothes that fit. A decent bed."

"Our bed is decent."

"She can't spend her whole life sleeping next to her brother." Dawn brings the bowl to his mouth. "She's outgrowing you. You know it. You both do."

Guy bites his lip, studying the surface of his soup.

"She's tired of your stories. Tired of the same tragedies and legends, Larbella and the Poet-King, over and over." When Guy doesn't reply, Dawn lowers his bowl. "So are you. I can tell."

"How?"

"The things you sing," he says. "In your sleep."

They finish the meal in silence. Dawn stands, takes their bowls, and the beetles chirp the hour. The night rapidly cools. When the barracks lights moan and shut off, scattering a swarm of spurned moths, Guy stands at the door with a candle. He gazes into the misty night, then paces the catwalk for a few minutes, until the wind blows out his flame. Exasperated, he undresses and crawls into bed.

Without Tyro, their slitted nook is uncomfortably roomy, and even the hellrat broth can't keep out the chill of Martyr's Moon. Guy curls at the edge of the foam mattress, blanket bunched at his chin. He closes his eyes for a few minutes, assuring himself that his sister will be fine, until he feels the mattress shift.

"You're shivering," comes Dawn's whisper. An arm snakes around him, a solid chest presses against his back, and for the first time since they were children, catching naps on the narrow overhangs of their errand routes, they lie perfectly fitted together.

Dawn's breath is warm in his ear. For a moment Guy fears he'll feel his lips, the stirring of an erection, the nudge to do what bunkmates are commonly presumed to. A needling dread tightens his throat. He has always considered the possibility—no, the inevitability—that one day Dawn would extract this price for all his years of kindness, of patience and loyalty. It is such a small price, Guy tells himself, merely a transmutation of a love they already share—yet when a hand moves up his chest, his heart jumps to his throat.

"Relax," Dawn whispers.

Then he stills, seemingly content just to lie beside him, an island of heat in the moldy chill. Slowly, Guy unclenches. In the bodiless vertigo of near sleep, he lets himself bask in Dawn's warmth.

"I'm sorry," Guy whispers.

"For what?"

"If I keep you up. With the … singing."

"No. It's nice. Like nothing I've heard before." He shifts his cheek against the back of Guy's head, and a breath touches his scar. "It's your sting."

"It's what? Oh, I don't know. Maybe."

"It is." Dawn's sleepy certainty is unnerving. "I've been … too."

"Oh, God. When?" Guy struggles to turn. "On Conundrum? After? You never reported it."

"I'm not sure what I would report. It was nothing. It was just an exposure. Not even a sting."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine. I'm just … having strange dreams again."

"About the canyon?"

"About the coffin. The one where I'm thrown into the river. But it's … different." He rolls onto his back. "I'm still sinking, and the water is coming in. The lid is still nailed shut. But this time, there's a crack. There's a way out." He lifts his arm, pressing it against the low ceiling. The honors inked into his wrist glint in the silver threads of river-light, one ring for each bullet. "All I have to do is reach. Reach up to the lid and make a fist and—"

Something bangs against wood. Guy starts, and his gaze flickers to the door, where another urgent knock rattles the hinges. He rolls out of the sleeping nook and stumbles to open it.

"Little *shit*—" he growls through his relief. "Where've—"

When he pulls the door open, it's not his sister on the other side.

"Emergency," Three says cheerfully.

His stomach drops. "It's not Ty, is it?"

"Ty? Course not. She's fine. Napping soundly under the punishment ward." Her grin widens. "No, we've got a *job,* Moulène. Call came down the lines from the overcity, straight for us. You'll never guess who it's from."

★ ★ ★

The infestation is visible all the way from the end of Finch Street, where the orderly bricks of businesses make way for the leaning towers of Splinter Row. A poison glow mushrooms over the sloped roofs. The sidewalk is dotted with onlookers, night doctors with their bags of contraband, courtesans and their dates, pajamaed children dropping down from balconies. A Palas lorry idles at an intersection, coughing greenish clouds of metabolites as its passengers reconnoiter. They do not approach the toxic effusion, but stand with guns ready. They too have heard reports of a new bug and its strange venom. Of course, like levelheaded soldiers, they don't believe the wilder stories, but their doubt doesn't make them any less uneasy.

It came on suddenly, one rifleman reports, overtaking Sreckt Brothers Pest Control and Hex Removal with the speed of a fire. Preceded by only a sweet smell and a jittery feeling in the night custodian's gut, the building flooded suddenly with an unidentifiable toxin. It spread from the ground floor within minutes, snaking up the stairs, percolating through walls and devouring the crossbeams. Tiles melted in the heatless smoke, dripping together like acrylics. Crossbeams stretched and splintered, the corridors bloated, ejecting bricks from crystalline mortar. Half the workforce evacuated, and the other half was called in to find the source of the infestation.

By the time Three's team arrives, nearly everyone in the company is on the street, barring the brothers themselves. The building burns in a heatless incandescence, fumes billowing from the windows in canopies of rippling toxin. Personnel flit about, some masked, others barefaced or with collars held over their noses. A woman in iron vine hugs herself, and a janitor comforts a weeping exterminator nearby. Discarded mask at her side, she holds her face, shaking. Something dark and slick blooms from between her fingers.

"Shit," Guy mutters. Already he can tell this will be a calamitous one. He perks his ear for the usual music, a warped soliloquy, the drumming of a hundred legs. He hears nothing over the buzz of panic on the street, over the angry shouts Sreckt employees have started to direct at them.

"Tighten your respirators, boys," Three says darkly. "This shit is airborne."

Guy adjusts his cannulas and floods his tank-sac with BSPAF, but before he takes his first step up the portico, a long black car pulls up beside him.

The vehicle eases to a halt, burnt sugar spilling from its exhaust pipe. The door swings open and a boot descends, followed by Bertram. He dons a mask and helmet, wearing a plated suit sleek as his three-piece. "Look at this." The hiss of his respirator can't hide the amusement in his voice. "What a light show."

"All respect, Eir Bertram," Three says, gesturing at him with her nozzle. "What the hell is this?"

"Just a proof of concept," he answers.

"You gonna grab a tank and join us?"

"Oh, no. I've come equipped for negotiation." He signals to his driver and the car pulls away. "The brothers are still holed up in there?"

"As far as we can tell," Three answers.

"Of course. They always do stay at the office so late." He tightens his tubules. "Well, off you go. I'll be up after you."

Guy glances to Dawn, who glances to Three, who shakes her head and lumbers toward Sreckt headquarters.

After clearing a dozen contriver-worm nests, Guy should be comfortable with the ritual. But when he steps into Sreckt, he hesitates. The gaseous toxin is so strange, so strong, he can feel it through his respirator. A cluster of aimless tones fills his stung ear. An orchestra tuning, or the ceiling fans.

"Something's weird," he mutters.

"You think?" Three answers, pointing her nozzle to the bloated dome of the reception hall. Toxin coats every surface with a sapphire sheen; paint peels from the archways in crystalline needles. Precipitated clusters of poison float through the air, and Guy can't help but feel as if he has been trapped between the facets of some monstrous jewel.

"Toxic phase transition," he says, hair standing on end.

"Like I said, Moulène," Three replies. "Airborne."

They scour the first floor, preceded by a cloud of BSPAF. Guy tries to follow his ear, led onward by a low, constant drone. He sweeps through ruined lavatories, offices, a room that may have once been a lounge but is now a cluster of fruiting bodies, bloated leather couches wheezing out crystal dust. They find no teratopods, nor Whittleston termites, nor captured strays. The only creature they discover is an abandoned hireling in the stairwell.

The man lies on the landing, bare face tilted toward the descending steps. He wears no iron vine, only a collared uniform, frayed by the acrid air. Too weak or noxious to flee, he emits small groans through bloated lips. Guy nearly drops his nozzle, nearly jumps up the stairs to help, but freezes when the man's eyes meet his own.

With a gurgling moan, the Srecktman twists. He pulls himself toward the stairs, swinging one arm forward, then the other, then a short, broken third. His bloated body comes into view at the lip of the landing, neck swelling under his collar, cotton splitting to release petals of proliferating skin. Cartilage crawls skyward like shoots, unfolding with paralyzing beauty.

Guy can't lift his nozzle; he can't think of what substances, if any, this encounter calls for. He can't think of anything but the

vague shape of Bebber lying on his back, his spongy, changed flesh running like paint.

Dawn steps forward, clicking his cannulas into place.

"No," Guy whispers under his mask. "No—"

"Stay here," Dawn says. He climbs the stairs and approaches the thing on the landing. He doesn't spray, doesn't flinch when the agonized limbs roll toward him. Instead, he replaces his nozzle with his bayonet, rests the tip over the hireling's neck, and drives it downward. The man—or the man-shaped mass of appendages—releases a kitten-like mewl, struggles briefly, then falls still. Though his limbs stop moving, they don't stop changing.

"I'll go up first," Dawn says, too calmly. "Stay behind me."

Three nudges Guy's back with a wooden elbow. "Check your respirator," she says without humor.

He does, then follows Dawn up the steps to the executive suites. A hall stretches before them, a promenade of offices and meeting rooms, bloated with toxin and weeping gold filigree. The largest and farthest of the doors leads to the office of the Sreckt brothers. By the names on the doorplate, there are three, but when Guy enters, he finds only two, and only one of them alive.

The first brother is flattened along the back wall, fused with a shattered mirror. He hangs in a spiderweb of cracked glass, bare mouth open. He clutches his respirator in one hand, or something that was once a hand, his contorted limbs amplified tenfold in their own broken reflection. Glass grows along his corpse like frost.

The other brother sits at the desk, dressed in iron vine and wearing his golden respirator. He doesn't stand when they enter, only rocks in his chair, gloved fist clenched on the desk.

"Eir Sreckt," Dawn begins. "Are you all right?"

"Fuck you," comes the reply. "Get out."

"You called us," Three mutters.

"Can we escort you out?" Dawn asks.

"Can you *escort me out*? You tell me, you shits. You did this." He shifts his burning glare between them. "Where's Bertram?"

"You can talk to him outside," Dawn offers.

"Oh, sure, like I'll be brought before him like a fucking *subject*—" His respirator hiccups, and Guy gets the impression he is spitting inside of it. "If that insect has anything resembling a spine, he'll come up himself." The gold trunk of his mask rotates toward the door. "That had better be him. Better be, by God's great broken corpse—"

"Calm down, Erik," Bertram says, stepping into the room. "Nice to see you. I was worried when we got the call—" He stops to consider the second brother. "Shit. What happened to Hans?"

"You fucking maggot," Sreckt replies. "You *fly.* You know what happened."

"Honestly, I don't." Bertram examines the body, suspended in a sacrificial pose like the old statues of the Mongfestun monks. "Not even sure Reames could figure that one out."

Sreckt lurches forward. "Wipe that smile off your face—I *know* you're smiling."

"Sorry. It's just—" Bertram's laugh is soft, devoid of malice. "If you hadn't spurned me in the boardroom, you might've been able to take care of this yourself. God knows you've got the resources."

Sreckt's goggles fix on Bertram. "Fifty million," he says. "Fifty million and I'll rent you the manufactory under Eighth. One year. That's less than half it's worth."

"A tempting offer, but a little late." Bertram pulls a folded paper from an iron-vine sac. Its edges curl in the misty toxin.

"*Vile,*" Sreckt spits. "Utterly vile."

"You saw what happened here, Erik. You've seen what's been happening. This thing can chew through Tiliard like butter."

"Oh, please. Some new pest crawls out of that goddamn river every year. We'd go broke if they didn't."

"Have you ever seen *that*?" Bertram nods toward Hans. "I'm only doing what I need to. Stepping in where others won't."

"Call the fucking Palas if you're that worried."

"You think they can handle this?" He drops the paper onto the desk. "This isn't mowing down woad farmers in Ostlerfell."

Sreckt's respirator clicks, but he says nothing.

"This place is about to molt, Erik. And I'm giving you a choice. You get to decide if you want to be the living body or the dead shell."

Sreckt stares at the paper. Something in his helmet whirs. "You need all of us to sign."

"Well, seeing as Hans is indisposed, and Franz—where is he? Little Franz?"

"No idea," Erik growls. "Coward ran the moment the alarms went off."

"Shame," Bertram sighs. "But one's a start."

The man stares at him, then retrieves his ink pad. "You're insane," he mutters.

"All good kings are, old boy. Remember Porrain? 'A laurel crown can only sprout atop a head of mulch.' Or something.

Guylag probably remembers—you remember that one, Eir Moulène? From *One Man's Pest*?"

Speechless, Guy can only nod.

"Of course he does. Here, Erik. Let's get you somewhere safe. You're going to donate your thumb to the cause, then?"

"What fucking choice to I have?"

"Same choice we all have, my dear. Same as every creature. Domestication, or extermination."

"Is that a fucking line from something?" Erik mutters. Bertram only laughs, placing his hand on the man's shoulder as he escorts him out.

THE LOVERS OF OLD VIENNT

The city reeks. The stench drips along the cracks in the stained glass of the Palas solarium, seeping through caulk and wood and the outcroppings of Revivalist statuary. Tiliard noisily soaks up the rain. The maples in Hart Park wilt with relief, canals foam and flood, and the machinery in the midcity moans as its rust is washed away. The Marshal Revenant can almost hear the din rising from the vaults of the Surgeon General's terraria, wet wails of a new ecdytoxin harvest, each drop squeezed with agonizing devotion from scarred and overtaxed glands. Though, that could just be the Neo-Repressionists Florian has strung up in the Palas torture theaters.

As Aster kneels before Sorav, depositing rough little coughs into one hand, the other dabbing swiftness on the tendons of his heels, he finds himself longing for the days of the Revival. The cleaner, dirtier days, when he didn't need to stand for hours and endure adornment, when ecdytoxin flooded from vats of enzymes straight to the streets, flushing enemy hideouts, billowing in clouds so monstrous they paralyzed assailants in their tracks. Those had been perfumes of a higher caliber. He doesn't recall the exact moment when his canisters became atomizers, his saber a letter opener, his artillery a mist of droplets. It was a slow decline, the notes of each fume decaying over the span of years.

It shouldn't have surprised him. It shouldn't have felt like a betrayal, to see the same toxins that concealed his advance on the Palas reduced to a mask for the foul odors of politicians, to see the fumes that had split open the tanks in the Row for Splinter Row used only to edge ladies' eyebrows slightly farther apart. Tiliard has always been hungry for the spoils of his violent art. Even those who had rallied most against the horrors of Ostlerfell still wore cravats dyed with its magnificent blue.

"Wrists, Eir Marshal," Aster says. He extends them, and she dots the base of each thumb with a formula to steady his hands. She does not ask who he is killing today. She seems pensive, trapped in some internal maze.

Not that Sorav is much better, after fielding so many calls from the Chancellor following the riverboat fiasco. The Marshal had tried to reason with him, assure him Florian's feral, undirected violence was only an effect of the acid rain. Gorslung would have none of it, insisting it was another attack, if not on his person, his image, which is far worse. Sorav is still unsure if he would rather validate his boss's paranoia than admit that Aster's work is slipping. It frightened even him, the way Florian had broken into a heinous stench, toxic fury burning through his scents as if he wore none at all. He's only relieved the boy had not been armed.

"What have you been putting in Florian's perfume?" the Marshal asks.

"What he wanted, Eir Patron. Liver tree ash. And bloodwort."

"Well, deny him next time. Cool him off. The Chancellor wants to incorporate a beheading into the wedding ceremony and he's eyeing Florian for that role." Aster nods, wheezing as her applicator touches his skin. When she rises to her feet, Maximian pulls a loose thread from her collar. His eyes follow the length of silver to a bulge in her breast pocket. "Did that man give that to you?"

Her scent widens like her eyes, the rush of adrenaline that always quickens her heart notes. "Which man?"

"Please, Asteritha. It took two of the Tender Guard to pull him off you."

She tries, and fails, to hide a smile, and a spark of irritation flickers in Sorav's gut. He's seen her lovestruck before, mostly during those tumultuous teen years when she pined for normalcy, obsessed with her role in that old ritual in which bodkins and handkerchiefs are exchanged. But each time she falls prey to a passion a little hotter than her smoldering infatuation with Elspeth, she is burned. And always, her work suffers for it. Young artists, Aufhocker reminds him (as if he needs reminding), are all too eager to draw inspiration from a poisoned well.

"You're not to see that man again," he says. "If it's company you need, I'll hire it out. There's a plague of idle young men looking for such contracts. And with this rain, it's safer to stay inside, anyway."

"Yes, Eir Patron." She still doesn't meet his eyes. She seems feverish, flushed in a way that heartache alone can't explain.

"Aster," the Marshal says. "I can hear you breathe. You need a lavage."

"I'm all right, Eir Patron."

"I'm going to call the Surgeon General."

Her gaze meets his. There's that scent again, that flicker that to any other nose might mask terror. He smells through it. He's no perfumer, but he's known her a long time.

"I feel fine," she says. "Besides, you need me—"

"I need you alive and functional." She flinches when he brushes her cheek. "You're unwell. My bath oils aren't working as they should. I'm having trouble sleeping."

A furrow appears on her forehead. "I'm sorry, Eir Marshal. I'll fix that. I promise."

"Do so. I don't want to make that call. I know you have no love for the Sanitarium."

She bobs her head and excuses herself, disappearing back into the foliage of the solarium. As his seamster enters with his uniform and the mortician his headdress, an ache of suspicion percolates his bones, a bodily memory not even mayfly can obscure. He can't banish the image of vant Passand on the riverboat—his face, blurred and discolored in the acid sun, dressed like a spoiled lordling and smelling, conspicuously, like nothing at all.

A thought strikes the Marshal as he clips on his cuff links. It seems clear to him now that the man was lying about Mongfestun. Likely a Crypsis agent of some sort, by the uncanny subtlety of his smell. The Chancellor has been trying to entice Aster into his service for years, baiting her with scented breath. And now, with his Laureate hanged and his wedding coming up, he's desperate enough to approach from a different angle.

Sorav sighs and wraps the thread around his glove. Before he summons the Tender Guard, before he takes to the streets to round up the Chancellor's least favorite nephews, he stops at the telephone. Because the sap-lines don't grow outside of Tiliard, he calls the post office.

As he waits for the line to respond, he twists the silver thread in his fingers. It's a sturdy, thick silk, frayed along its length by a soft fuzz. As it curls and sways in an imperceptible draft, a shiver runs up his spine.

"Good morning, Eir Marshal," the operator says.

"Good morning. I have a records request I need you to send to Mongfestun."

★ ★ ★

Guy almost makes it back to bed. He holds his composure as they march from Sreckt headquarters to the barracks, as they hose off their suits and decontaminate their equipment, as they sidle across the planks to the apartment. Then, a dozen paces from the door, he succumbs to the ring in his ear, leans over the handrail, and vomits. He trembles, head throbbing, while Dawn loosens his collar and rubs his neck.

Shapes blossom under his eyelids. The vision of the dying Srecktman wilts and regrows, cycling with the pulsations of his vertigo. His scar throbs, though he can't tell if it's only because of the retching. "*Shit,*" he breathes. "That was *weird,* Dawn. Too weird. That gas—"

"You're all right," Dawn says. He wears the same calm face as when he laid the bayonet on the Srecktman's neck, the same spot where he now rests his hand on Guy's. "You're fine."

Guy shivers. In his mind, the blade glides too smoothly through skin. "Oh, God. That Srecktman—where was the bug? Where was the goddamn bug?"

"It's there, Guy. The team on the next shift will find it."

"There *wasn't* one. There wasn't. There was nothing. Just the toxin. And it was *flat.* I expected a big one. A brood-parent or something." A cold dread seizes him, an uncanny confusion, like seeing a rush of blood and being unable to find a wound. "What were we supposed to—oh, God."

He retches over the railing again as the weight of the past few months crashes over him. Dizzy with visions of Conundrum, of Bebber's corpse, of hallucinatory landscapes of brick and flesh and poison, he sinks against the handrail. He tries to tell himself it's always been like this. There's always been some threat, some bizarre pest that, without the aid of hindsight, appears inexplicable. He knows the stories of Old Dog's Chase Dream, with the dismemberments, the disembodiments, the alien lights that haunted all who set foot on it, until they sawed off the infested root entirely. He knows the stories of slithering albino giants, of mind-altering lichens, of the Mammoth Stag, the closest thing to a dragon the city has ever seen. It is all just another trough in the wave, he tells himself, another turn of Tiliard's biological seasons. He's been through worse. This is only half as bad as his first day of meatpacking.

"Shit." He shivers in the biting wind. "I can't do this. I can't do this, Dawn."

He leans over Guy, offering his hand. "Just rest. You need rest."

"That toxin. It's in me. It's still *in* me."

"It's in me, too. It's all right." Dawn pulls him to his feet. There is a strange exhilaration in his touch. "I won't let anything happen to you. I swear, Guy."

He helps Guy through the freezing wind, arm around his waist, steadying him as he would when a delivery might take them over a slippery rootlet. It's barely warmer inside; they take off only their jackets before crawling into their sleeping nook.

The mattress is already occupied. Groping through the dark, Guy finds a small body rolled up in the blankets, nose barely exposed. Unsure if it's anger or cold that drives him, he grabs Tyro's shoulders and tugs the blankets loose. He intends to bully

an apology from her, an explanation for her brief disappearance, but when he tears the sheets away, she doesn't fight him. She only clings, desperate, to his sleeves.

"Tyro…" he mutters, unable to bring himself to scold her.

The mattress sags as Dawn slips in on his other side. "You worried your brother, grub," he says. "Don't do that again."

Tyro doesn't answer, only nestles into Guy. "You smell like puke," she whispers.

"Still better than you, grease-beetle." As he draws her close, they tremble, with cold and—both can tell—with something else. Her throat bobs against his arm, readying a question, then swallowing it again.

"I won't ask if you don't," she whispers eventually.

"All right, princeling," he sighs. "Tale for another night."

Her hair tickles his chin. Without the weight of length, her ringlets have tightened just like his own. They'll grow out well, he thinks. She'll look just like the last tenor he'd seen play the lead in *The Lovers of Old Viennt.* And, he can't help but think as he drifts off, a little bit like the curly-haired spaniel that accompanies him onstage, to whom he sobs his final aria, when he realizes he and his true love will never meet, in this life or the next.

★ ★ ★

At first, Demetrius is sure he'll be killed. He's sure he's served himself on a platter to a man with no love of music, and even less of dance, a torturer whose sadism is rivaled only by that of his protégé, the little Impaler of the Tender Guard. But half a dozen performers have gone to the Marshal Revenant this year so far, and all have returned without a scratch, and, tellingly, without anything to say about their visit. It seems, if only by the deafening silence surrounding the matter, the worst danger in accepting the Marshal's invitations is to talk about them. What Maximian Sorav does, even in his spare time, is confidential business.

Demetrius endures his own ordeal wordlessly. He holds his head down, performs as expected, and when the Marshal's private car drops him off at the end of Petunia ten thousand marks richer, his only blemish is the smear of ink on his thumb swearing him to silence. He has no intention of keeping it, of course, and frankly, Sorav should know better than to trust a man who makes his living with grand displays of untruth.

He waits at his favorite table at Bean Pulp with the *Lunar Herald* splayed over his face. The Marshal is out playing with his guns today, since the weather will only dampen his fumigants. The streets are empty but for the patter of enfilades and acid rain, the lunch crowd more cockroach than human. And still, Mal is nowhere to be seen.

Demetrius glances through the paper, then again, occasionally lifting his eyes to search the room before they return to the photograph on the second page. There he is, skewering his opponent, off-kilter with a smile on his face, holding his body in a position so novel he hasn't named it yet. *Inspired by Thomas the Younger's recent victory,* he reads again and again, *scholars reexamine the outcome of the ancient War of the Lilies.* And his father assured him he'd never make history.

"Dee." Finally, Mallory's thin glove crinkles the top of the newspaper. "It's not decent to stroke your ego so hard in public."

"Oh, let a man indulge. You'll be seeing a lot more of me soon enough." He takes one last look at the photograph before folding the paper. "Tastes are changing. I'll be principal next season."

"If the stage survives that long." When the waiter comes around, Mal shakes out his napkin with a prim little flick. Even after all these years he's still got some of that old chaplain's dainty habits. "What's this I smell on you, Dee? Bilge musk?"

"Awful, isn't it? A gift from the Chancellor. Trying to woo me with his pheromones. Wants me to play him at his wedding." He grins. "I hear you've been quite busy yourself, Eir Mallory. That you've got your thumb on the Marshal's perfumer."

"And hers on me. Hasn't turned me in yet, though."

Demetrius lowers his voice as the waiter delivers their coffee. "Is she good?"

"Very good."

"That's what Elspeth tells me. And she would know, poor woman. Have you seen her latest sketches? Each one an Extemporist cry for help."

"She's going to get herself arrested," Mallory sighs.

"Well, that's fine." Demetrius leans his chair on its back legs. "Once you're Marshal, you'll have the keys to every cell in the city."

"I have no desire to be Marshal."

"And that's qualification enough. This place could use a Grand Marshal Reluctant."

Mallory turns his eye to the rain outside. "Who is he after today?"

"Chancellor's nephews, I think. He's out in his stupid headdress again. Must think it makes him look serious."

"He finally learned a little showmanship, didn't he?" Mallory's lip curls. "I'd pity him, if he were a little less pathetic."

Demetrius laughs. It always pleases him to see that bitter smile, a relief to know that Mongfestun Correctional College for

Recalcitrant Boys and Young Men hadn't, after all, corrected his recalcitrance. When they'd first reunited in Tiliard, when Mallory found him after a particularly bloody show in the ruins of the Argland Theater, he had worried that their years apart might have chiseled him into the respectable gentleman-soldier Mongfestun promised. But he had slipped effortlessly into the gutters of the midcity, back into the twisted roots with the ease of a man who had been born there. Mallory traversed Demetrius's darkest social circles, exchanging money and information and flèches as diligently as any upstart. A risk that will not go unrewarded, when Demetrius holds the laurels.

If not Grand Marshal, Mal will have to settle for Seamster Laureate. Demetrius will always need a friend who can manage to measure once and cut twice.

"How was your performance?" Mallory asks.

"God, Ludovico was *thrilling.* The way the routine just grows from him—truly the last bastion of Revivalist dance. It was almost a shame to end his career. And that *lily*! Just fantastic how it turned out. I heard it gave the Chancellor quite the scare."

"I meant your private performance, Dee."

"Oh, that." He waves his hand, feigning dismissal.

"Where did the Marshal take you?"

"Not to bed."

"I told you he wouldn't."

"No, no, you win that bet. He picked me up on Petunia and we just drove around for a while. I thought it'd be, I don't know, a back-seat fondle or something. *Nothing.* He didn't even make eye contact. It was kind of rude, honestly."

"So, where did he take you?"

"Hard to say. Windows were draped. Couldn't see out the windshield. We went through a gate into the midcity, I don't know which one. I had no idea where we were when we finally stopped. He opened my door for me and took me down this … passage. There were these metal doors on either side. A few of them barred. Tender Guard everywhere. The moment I realized he brought me to some sort of prison, I started shitting myself. I was sure he'd found us out, that you betrayed me. I was so mad at you for half a minute."

Mallory, unoffended, rests his chin on his hand. "How far down were you?"

"Deep enough for Strangleroot, considering the sap leakage. The whole place was sticky. And the stench. Utterly *vile.* Blood and shit and something else. He took me down a hall, past a few cells—couldn't see inside, but you could hear what kind of monsters they had locked in there. One sounded like a person vomiting, over and over. Another was clicking its teeth—or maybe just a typewriter somewhere, I don't know. It was nasty, Mal."

Mallory closes his eyes and takes in a little breath, short and silent, just as he used to at Mongfestun, always right before he began to cry. He doesn't cry now, thank God—the soup has just arrived.

"So he leads me down into this xylem shaft," Demetrius continues when the waiter is gone. "Hits the lights. The place is huge, and he's built this—platform across it. Empty, except for a phonograph. Takes me a moment to realize it's a stage. This pervert has a fucking *stage* in his prison. I would've laughed if I wasn't so sure I was going to die on it."

Mallory's mouth is a thin, taut line. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, worse. He put on Tasarte. 'Aubade.' Told me I'm going to dance to it. No warning, no time to prepare. Which was no problem for me, of course, but—well, he left for a few minutes, brought in someone else, and I shit you not, it's—"

"Aufhocker," Mallory says.

"Not sure who else it could've been. Didn't look much like the posters—the man was a wreck. And he just … sat, and the Marshal put the music on. And they watched in silence. Fucking *terrible.* It was like those nightmares that third-eye dust can give you. Worst audition of my life."

"Well," Mallory croaks. "Did you do a good job, at least?"

"What? Of course I did. You know me, Mal, I can *improvise.* At least well enough that the Marshal spared my life. And gave me a tip big enough to guarantee I'd never speak of this again. Speaking of. Here." He fishes an envelope from his jacket pocket, but Mal ignores it.

"Is he heavily guarded?" he asks.

"Heavily guarded and hard to find. And neck-deep in toxin."

Mallory pinches his brow, a little too pensively for Dee's taste.

"God." He reaches over, tilting Mallory's chin with the corner of the envelope. "Stop *planning,* Mal. I see you planning. It'll only make everything harder when it all goes to shit." He taps his friend's cheek with the envelope until, begrudgingly, he takes it. "You have to learn to live without a script."

He gives Demetrius a stern look.

"Fine, fine. I'll give credit to Aufhocker, just a little. If he hadn't written *The Lilies,* I never would've gotten this far."

"You never would've escaped Mongfestun."

"You mean the flour sack?" He laughs. "God, that was stupid. Aufhocker is so pedestrian. No offense. I know you love him."

"Dee, if I had my way, that man would never write an opera again." He stands, tucking the envelope into his pocket, but not before counting every banknote—as if the miser weren't hoarding enough wealth to keep himself afloat for months. Always counting and saving, counting and saving, though for what, Demetrius can't say. Mallory has always been unforthcoming about his money, though Dee has heard he's been in good standing with some wine-runners down at the docks lately.

"Thanks for your help," Mallory says. "Don't get yourself killed."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do that for me." Dee takes Mallory's hand. He lifts it to his lips, thumb on his pulse, where he can feel the soft thrill of his venom. "I need more, Mal. We've got old Gorslung shaken up, but these little stings—well, you know, they heal. We need something bigger. Something *grand.* Something for a wedding, maybe."

"I can make a few pocket squares," Mallory says darkly.

"Come on, you can do more than that." The corners of Mal's lips twitch, and Dee can't help squeezing his hand. "God, you're beautiful. Stay ruthless for me."

Mallory only offers his honest smile. "I'm not doing this for you."

★ ★ ★

"Did you hear what the *Arbuscle* said about the luncheon?" the Chancellor says. "'An exercise in vulgarity'—can you believe it? From *them.* They haven't had a good critic since Wilhelm's reign."

Sorav sighs, cradling the phone on his shoulder and looking through the paperwork on his desk.

"Fucking *hacks.* They're even bringing Aufhocker into this—now what does Revivalist theater have to do with your monster's poor behavior on my boat?"

"I'm not sure, Eir Patron." Sorav holds up a faded photograph to the light, trying to make out the solemn faces. He can barely recognize his own, it's so overexposed.

"I don't want to read another word from them, Max. Add them to the list. What fucking number are we on? Eight ninety?"

"Eight ninety-two." In the photograph, a hundred or so inmates stand before the monastery. One face, distant features nothing but gray smudges, accompanies the name of M. vant Passand. An unremarkable young man amid a sea of unremarkable young men. To Sorav's surprise, it appears that he told the truth about Mongfestun. And that in itself is highly suspicious.

"How's the rat-catching?" the Chancellor asks. "You get anyone to confess to the attack yet?"

"A dozen or so."

"God. That's not very many. All false, I presume?"

"Of course." Sorav locates himself at the edge of the photograph, that year's honored guest, as expressionless as the rest of them. "I have my eye on something, though."

"The arm's only getting worse, Max. Up to my shoulder now—nothing *works* on it, at least nothing my second-rate perfumers can make. My whole regalia just smells *off.* Aster—you must lend me Aster. At least for the wedding."

Sorav resists the pull of his words. "Contract" is all he can say, but the Chancellor doesn't seem to hear him.

"God, I can't take all this at once. Elspeth is insisting on that hideous dress—haute couture, she says—it looks like the same shit that's been popping up in these new galleries. You know, they're starting to say she's one of them?"

"One of what?"

"In this city you are what you're called and I won't have her called fucking *Extemporist.* They're everywhere right now. God. *Glow-snail shells,* Max. She's going to blind everyone there."

Sorav's memory of that day returns piecemeal. Lunch with the headmaster, the disciplinary demonstrations, the boys sweating like pigs in their formalwear—including Florian, no more than eight and still a sweet child, insisting on following his master to every dismal ceremony.

"Creatures, all of them," the Chancellor says. "These flower girls she wants—she's going through those Orphanwell catalogues and they're just awful. Can't sit through an audition. You'd think with so many kids littering the streets these days, there'd at least be one or two with some class."

Maximian sets aside the photograph and the graduation roster. He unfolds his next stack of papers, pulling out Mallory's scores, his etiquette violations, his history. He is, like many in Mongfestun, the unruly son of a southern landowner. His was a punitive enrollment; he was captured at twelve during a raid on a smuggler's ship. His father, an Eir D. Bateusse, was charged four thousand marks a month as tuition.

There's a story there. A terror of a boy, without his father's surname. An adopted son, an orphan, maybe a vineyard worker. Southern vintners are known to throw children to the winds as soon as their feet grow too large and rough for the work.

"A charity case," Sorav guesses.

“Exactly,” the Chancellor replies. “She wants to donate that fucking monstrosity of a dress after the wedding. God knows what use *charity* will have for it.”

The name Bateusse is familiar to the Marshal, but only vaguely, obscured by so many others, changing with the times and wheels of power. He removes his pen from its case and begins drafting a letter. If sent by schooner, a reply might only take a few days to come from Dagdrun.

“I get the feeling you’re not listening, Eir Marshal. This *dress*—”

“What would you like me to do about it?” Sorav growls. “Kill your fiancée?”

“God, no! Are you insane? Not until she’s done my portrait. I just need some pest control. I want you at my rehearsals. Keep an eye on the crowd. And I want you close. I don’t trust you enough to let you run loose.”

“Chancellor—”

“If you’re not responsible for all this, you owe me protection from it. If you *are,* I’ll make it easy for you. You can get your little coup or whatever over with and save us all the time—oh stop. I can hear you sighing, Max. You have no excuse not to come. Have you heard the music? The *vows*? It’s Aufhocker at his absolute best.”

Sorav grits his teeth. “As you wish, Chancellor.”

“Good. Don’t make me threaten you, old friend. That would be impolite.”

THE BORISCH MANUAL OF CATOPTRIC PEST SPECIES, 100TH ED.

A few weeks after the infestation of Sreckt Brothers Pest Control and Hex Removal, another entry is added to the *Manual.* Dawn stands before the workforce on the gathering platform, reading the text aloud. No. 400 is the first human species added to the list, and the news is delivered with the necessary solemnity.

"This information comes from 37923," Dawn says. "This is her briefing, so pay attention."

Guy stands at the back of the small crowd, arms crossed. There have been no teratopod calls for days now, but that has given him no relief. In their place, calls come of a smaller but no less dangerous animal, a hunched, humanoid thing found in the streets around Sreckt headquarters. Unemployed and idle, limbs burgeoning from their shredded uniforms, the casualties of the teratopod infestation crawl through the alleyways, humming the company jingle and harassing passersby. The vengeful creatures can be found in seedy bars and relatives' apartments and their former offices, malformed and toxic and dying—or worse, trying to survive. Guy hasn't killed one himself, but he's watched Dawn kill three.

"'Belligerent and soft-bodied,'" Dawn reads aloud. "'The Contaminated Srecktman is generally susceptible to blades, truncheons, BSPAF, projectiles, and vehicular force.'"

Something pinches Guy's finger. He retracts his hand, and finds Tyro glancing up at him.

"Not now," he tells her.

"It's important." She emphasizes this by stretching onto her toes and whispering his thumb name into his ear. "Em. Please."

He glances at Dawn and follows her back to their apartment, to the sleeping nook, where she tears back the blanket.

"I think I got stung," she says calmly, then bursts into tears.

He bends into the nook, stomach turning. At first he's not sure what he's looking at, but as he shakes loose the sheet and examines the mottled red stain, he deflates with relief. "Is this why you've been hiding, grub? Why you're sleeping outside?"

"I'm sick," she says. "I don't know how, but I got stung. I just started to—"

Guy strips the foam, trying to keep from smiling. "You're not stung, Tyro."

"I'm not going to change. I'm not—"

"It's all right, Ty." He pushes her away and folds the sheet. While Tyro holds her belly and shakes as if she has witnessed a killing, Guy finds comfort in the perfect mundanity of her panic.

"It stopped for a while," Tyro says. "I thought I would live. But it came back."

"Oh, princeling. It comes back a lot."

"How many times?"

"I don't know. A couple dozen, at least."

As her face scrunches, a needle of shame pricks at Guy. He should know better than to let her glean this information on her own. He should've had at least one story that did not pave the passage to adulthood solely with duels and riddles and romantic conquest and, in the case of Classicist operettas, killing and ritually devouring one's father.

He figures he ought to take her to someone. Disturbing Nic this early in the morning is a good way to earn a punitive lobotomy. Bell would try to charge for the information, and Margot is out of the question.

"Fuck me," he sighs. "Come on, Ty."

She shrinks at his offered hand as she would a threat. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're gonna see if Three's around."

She slips her hand into his. They walk for a few minutes in silence, shivering in the misty wind. "It'll just come again," she says eventually. "I know what this is. It'll come again, over and over. Until I die."

"Ty, you're not dying. Just shedding velvet, like the stags in Hart Park."

He wants to laugh at her. He wants so badly to give her a playful shove, to pull her hair and shake some sense into her. But he recognizes the look on her face, her initial brush with the helpless mutability of the human body. He wore the same one when he first saw *Ripest Fruit,* the first time he realized the crucifixion was not performed but *performed,* the blood too bright to be believed, the moans too musical, the begging too profane. As the crew lowered the dying criminal to prepare him for the matinée, caking his wounds in makeup, Guy came to realize the cruel beauty of a part that can only be played once.

"What *Manual* entry do you want tonight?" he asks.

"I don't know," Tyro replies. "One with lots of blood. The one with the murders."

"Bast Street Butcher?"

"No, where the bug scientist is sacrificed."

"*The Price of Beauty,*" he says. "That's a nasty one."

"Yeah. That one."

"Okay. Soon as I get off. So stay around the apartment." He knows he will be exhausted by day's end, but the thought of letting a tale loose, of releasing it into the night air, relieves him.

"I get to sing Sigmund, though," Tyro says.

"Whatever part you want, princeling."

★ ★ ★

Florian's new perfume is the product of seven tireless days in the solarium. Determined to show she is hale enough for work, Aster distills his scent with the same obsessive diligence as she makes the Marshal's bath oils. She leaves her organ only to eat, barely to sleep. For days, she grinds and decants, distills and mixes, blanketing the room in scents so cold they wilt half her plants. Trying, and failing, to push aside her thoughts of Mallory, she steels her breath against the chill, tying his frayed handkerchief over her mouth. By the time she adds the final drop of ecdytoxin, shivering and blue-lipped, she almost faints with relief.

It fits Florian like a glove, slipping over his skin with a subdued sheen. She watches him demonstrate his new scent for the Marshal from the garden balcony, feeling the cold even from two stories high.

Florian resembles his mentor like a son, circling the tulip beds adorned in essence of chillbug and liquid argentum. Two of the Chancellor's nephews kneel blindfolded in the flowers, while Sorav stands nearby, flanked by Tender Guard and the faint scent of mayfly exudate. The Marshal watches his successor with a blank, almost saddened look, as if haunted by a face he can't recognize.

Florian positions himself behind the first prisoner, then disposes of him. Devoid of his usual sadistic flair, he places his sidearm to the man's head and fires a single shot. The second is identically dispatched, cleanly and tastefully. The tulips rustle in pleasure, and a sparrow flutters from a nearby shrub. Florian hands his firearm to the silk-gloved bailiff, and the Tender Guard applauds politely.

Aster examines the scene under the churning purple clouds as an artist her work, the glint of stained glass, the flutter of insect wings and falling petals, life on death on life, a tableau composed with more extravagance than Rebau ever could've dreamed. It strikes her as painfully crude.

A tendril of gunpowder and misted blood snakes up to the balcony. Though it shouldn't, the smell of her own work sends a spasm up her throat. She lifts her hand to her breast pocket, hiccups, then the rattle of her cough breaks the quiet dignity of the execution. A dozen eyes turn toward her, and she backs away from the balustrade, then flees into the hall.

A few Tender Guardsmen find her in the corridor. They bend to help her, to ask if she's all right, and she only gasps, crawling wordlessly along the wall. When the youngest Guard sees the blood she leaves behind, he flees to fetch the Marshal. Aster shoos the others away, struggling to the nearest washroom, and when she locks the door, securing an ounce of privacy, she slumps with Mallory's handkerchief to her face. She coughs, paces across the emerald tiles, groping helplessly along the amber mirrors, the gold faucets and basins.

Each breath comes shallower than the last. She grips the sides of the sink, trying to force air into her lungs, until her head swims, empty but for the panicked thought that this will be the one, this attack will be her last, this will be the position she dies in—alone, flattened on a bathroom counter, arm draped over her forehead in the classic position of the fatally infatuated soprano. She would laugh, if she had the breath.

She pushes out one last cough, strains for the strength to force another, and a solid, slick mass fills her windpipe. It crawls upward in painful peristalsis, a long, soft plug. She bears down, jaw wide, already too air-starved to make out the wormlike thing in her pharynx, large, too large, and expanding as it rises. Purple-faced, ribs aching, she attempts to expel it, but she can't —she reaches into her mouth, probing deep and blindly, until her fingertips brush something solid. She pinches the slick cast, but it rolls between her fingers. Shaking, tears spilling down her cheeks, she tries again, then again, then splays Mallory's handkerchief in her hand and tries once more. Finally, scraping the fabric along the back of her throat, she manages to grasp it. She tightens her hold, steels herself, and pulls.

Branch by agonizing branch, it emerges. She chokes on a wail as the bronchial cast struggles out of her. The world darkens in her periphery, and she grips, begging, praying, to God and her parents and Elspeth and Mal, clinging to the image of his face, the taste of his lips, his hums of an Aufhocker ballad fading in and out with the rush of blood in her ears.

Right as her strength fails her, as her knees buckle and her exhausted lungs give in, the thing pulls free. It slips from her mouth in a rush of blood and mucus, in a streak of raw, exquisite pain. She moans, pulling loose the last flaccid branches, and collapses against the counter. She gulps down the cold air and grips the washbasin, waiting for the teary after-spasms to relent. Slowly, her sight realigns. She drops Mallory's handkerchief beside the thrashing mass in the sink, and lifts her head. She examines herself in the mirror, lips spattered with blood, makeup running down her cheeks. Then she takes a deep, painful breath, and realizes it is clearer, smoother, than any she has taken in years.

Cautiously, she takes another. Her eyes move down to the sink, where Mallory's handkerchief lies draped over her bloody cast. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the embroidery crawls from the fabric, drawn upward as if by a slight draft. The strings fray from their patterns, loosening Mallory's initials, the river and the dragon and Guylag. As Aster watches the hundreds of tiny, wormlike movements, unsure if what she sees is real or the conjurations of an anoxic brain, she can't help but think of his joyless smile, his scarred fingers picking at the lacy edge of the handkerchief. *Some things are made to unravel.*

"What the fuck, Mal," she mutters.

A knock rattles the door. Aster jumps at the Marshal's muffled voice asking her if she's all right.

"I'm fine," she answers, twisting on the hot water. Hands shaking, she struggles to extricate the handkerchief from the mucinous cast, trying to wash away the proof of her worsening illness, of Mallory's strange threads. "I'm fine!" she calls again, but that doesn't stop the next knock, or the next.

Hopeless, she rolls the cast between her fingers, trying to stuff it down the drain, all the while tangled with the unraveling embroidery. She gasps, takes another breath—another clear one, *God,* what a feeling—and tries to gather her wits.

She should throw it in the toilet, she knows—her cast, and the handkerchief too. She should brush up and compose herself, walk back out to the Marshal, but despite her exhaustion, all she wants is to break a window and crawl away, slip down the side of the building with her running eyeliner and frizzed hair, flee across Conundrum, all the way to Mal's, collapse at his feet, throw herself into his arms or her fist into his face, demand to know what the hell he's threaded through this batiste, demand to know what he's done to her.

The door rattles open, and Aster freezes. She glances into the mirror, at the Marshal standing over her shoulder, and for a moment, she sees the same reflection he does: a sickly girl bent over the sink, blood on her blouse, mascara down to her chin, shredded handkerchief clenched in a white-knuckled fist. In the span of a second, she shrinks back into herself, this utterly deranged, foul creature, looking as if she's just crawled from some contaminated sewer.

He doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. His eyes flicker to the bloodied thing in the sink.

"I'll go," Aster rasps. She straightens. "I'm sorry, Eir Marshal. I'll go see her."

He nods. "I'll make the call."

"Can I … can you get me a car?" She balls what's left of the handkerchief in her hand, then into her pocket. "Not a lorry. Please. I don't want to go like a prisoner."

Sorav's face softens. "Of course," he says, then turns away.

* * *

Bertram, unlike the Borisches who came before him, isn't a lounger. He sits at his desk only when necessary, or only for show—he's less of a fat cat than a stalking tom. He has a hungry gait, a sign of the kind of ambition passed down in families with historied thumb names.

Three recognizes him from the old days, though she's not sure if he can return the favor. She'd run into him a handful of times before her exile, always at some Chancellery event or another, back when she was an operative for Wherewithal, Inc., and he was just his uncle's nephew, some parvenu only close enough to power to feel the sting of its distance. Now, at least in everything but name, he is a different man. Then again, so is she. The past is only ever populated by strangers, Guy had told her once, referencing some pompous corpse or another. Albrecht Vaughn, maybe. Or God.

She watches Bertram pace the Borisches on the wall. He hasn't removed his predecessors' portraits, nor added his own. Just a mirror at the end of the line, as if he can't settle for anything less than a perfect reflection.

Bertram reads her report standing. She's tried her best to clean up some of the imagery in her sitreps, to make the descriptions comprehensible, but she's no Poet-King. The Contaminated Srecktman has a morphology that's difficult to pin down. Some are found dead, so decayed they're nothing but a shallow mound of bones sprouting from the cobblestones. Sometimes they still seem utterly human, just angry layoffs in tattered uniforms, stalking the streets with knives and harsh words in case they run into their rivals from Borisch-Gorslung.

"How many so far?" Bertram asks.

"Twenty-eight. And a half. The half we found was … budding, though."

"*Budding.*" There is a tone of delight under his terror, like a child about to swing across a vine bridge for the first time.

"Maybe more like a molt. You'd know if you saw it."

"Well, be sure to take a photograph next time." He closes her report and tosses it onto his desk. "Any word on Franz? He's holding up the paperwork."

"Still barricaded in the factory under Eighth. Rallying the troops. A gang of them tried to jump us when we were clearing out Finch Street."

"Oh, Franz. Stubborn little Franz." Bertram sighs. "Won't take Erik's calls, but he's got a line straight to the *Rhizosphere.* Spewing nonsense about how *we* infested his company. As if I have these bugs trained like dogs."

"Well, that might hold water if there were any bugs in the place. No one's found anything. Not that the damage makes it easy. Can't tear through a wall to look before another one grows in its place."

"Fascinating."

"No end to the surprises with these things." Three pauses, taking in the complacent glint in his eye. He wears his menace with the grace of a dinner jacket. "Not your everyday bug that learns to aerosolize its venom. Or to deploy it remotely, for that matter. And against a competitor."

Bertram smiles. "Do you have a question you'd like to ask, Arimand?"

His tone is so amicable, so straightforward, even her thumb name does not sound like a threat in his mouth. She's unsurprised he has it; though she's signed under a number, she's easy enough to trace. Easier than Dawn, who is dead by every other name, or Guy, who has such an arsenal of pseudonyms she'd be surprised to learn he has a real one.

"It just makes me wonder," she says, "what all this bustle is at R&D. And this new face you hired. Relative of yours, I think. It took me a while to recognize him. Looks just like the man who was arrested after that bioalchemical scandal at the University."

"Proceed carefully, my dear," Bertram says. "A sinking boat is not a good one to rock."

"I've no intention of rocking anything. But I'd appreciate some idea of what kind of rapids we're about to cruise into."

"Well." He places his hands in his pockets and shrugs. "In that case, ask away."

She waits for the prickle of paranoia, for the familiar feeling of being led on and sold out. She senses no thugs in the doorway, no gun in his pocket, nothing but the creaking of thin ice under her feet.

"You've been at this a while, haven't you?" she asks.

"This?"

"All this teratopod shit. You knew about it well before Conundrum."

"I should hope so. That's part of Species Management."

"Right. But you haven't been in Species Management for a while now."

"Well, no. I left about the same time the teratopod crawled out of the river. Coincidentally."

"Sure." She crosses her arms, tapping a finger against her wooden elbow. "Do they know about this bug?"

"Not nearly as much as I do." His shrug is boyish. "Though, I'll be honest, that's still not enough. Hard to grasp, this thing. Even harder to hold on to. We kept it contained in the septic capillaries for a while, keeping it fed and happy. A little *too* fed. It got greedy. It wanted a taste of the top." He laughs, gently, genuinely. "Like we all do."

Even as a shiver runs up her spine, even as her oaken arm aches a warning, she can't help but glance through his window. She takes in the open sky, the view of God Himself setting over the valley, dying and rising and dying, endlessly renewed even as the husk of the world shrivels to dust.

"You know," she says, eventually, "I've seen a few ambitious men pass through the undercity. Some of them even manage to strike up from below. Never *this* far below. Usually they commandeer a mercenary outfit. Something a little more straightforward."

"Come on, Arimand. Where's the art in that?"

She snorts. "Smuggling guns isn't as easy as it used to be, huh?"

"Hah! Certainly not—but it doesn't matter. I have no interest in those tired conventions."

"Just how high are you aiming, Eir Bertram?"

"Oh, not too high. I'll settle for Chancellor."

"Nothing less than the worst job in Tiliard."

"Yes," he sighs. "I know. Chancellorship is a labor of love. But I love this city. It's a thing of such beauty and yet—the *rot,* Arimand. It's been decaying for so long, and no one's bothered to do anything about it. I want to see this place alive again. I want to see it *live.*" He leans over his desk. "I won't bore you with a speech. Every two-bit hack has some grand vision for this city. But none have had the means to see it through. Even the best Chancellors have only ever been painting with mud."

"And now you've got yourself some oils."

He smiles, a joyful, insane light in his eyes, the same that Guylag gets when he takes his informal rehearsals a little too far. *Hell is a room full of washed-up thespians,* she thinks. *And God help me, I've thrown in my lot with them.*

"Well," she sighs. "If you're already gonna hang for it, might as well commit the crime."

Bertram raises an eyebrow.

"Or whatever. From *Faustech.* Guy says it sometimes."

"Bless that boy. It's close enough."

"You'd better save him a seat in your box, Bert. You better give him everything he deserves."

"You don't think I pay my debts? Look at my arms if you don't believe me."

"I believe you."

He leans over his desk. "And what do you deserve, Arimand? You want your position at Wherewithal back?"

"God no." She closes her eyes. At this stage in her life, crawling out of this shithole should be good enough. Just a little taste of the sun again, a little something to ease her aching back, her aching knees, her aching arm. "Half a million marks," she says. "And a penthouse in Hart Park."

He grins. "You're a cheap sell, Captain."

She leaves his office dizzy. As she descends the stairs to the elevator, her heart flutters with a cautious sort of hope. Bertram's already got the perfect black locks for laurels. A cloud of teratopod toxin might convince the rest of the city of that, too. In defiance of her better judgment, she believes him. Either he's an impossibly good liar, or completely honest, and she's not sure which is worse.

She exits the elevator and rounds the path to her workshop, only to find Guy sitting at her door, sister at his side. Next to each other, they look so unlike, to the point where Three wonders if Guylag didn't just spy her somewhere and steal her, misdirected by his selfish heart, by that boyish urge to tend, the need to always have something to prune and control and care for. But what similarities their features lack in form they make up for in function. They frown with the same little wrinkles, their brows knot in the same way, their eyes are forged of the same brass.

When Three approaches, they glance up at her with an identical nervous look. Tyro has been crying, and it takes Three only a moment to guess the reason.

"Ah, hell," she sighs, unlocking the door to her workshop. "Come on in, grub. I've got herbs and shit."

★ ★ ★

The car arrives at the Palas just as the afternoon rains pick up. The Marshal escorts Aster out to the front under a glass umbrella, steadying her on his arm. To her relief, he's allowed her to clean herself up a bit, to grab some things from her room and stuff them into her purse, though she will not stay at the Sanitarium long. Overnight at most, or so he tells her. If she needs anything, he says again and again, she need only call. The Palas is just a short drive away.

"Thank you, Eir Marshal," she says. She feigns a cough, though when she lifts her sleeve to cover her mouth, the quaver in her fingers is real enough.

Sorav opens the car door for her, and as she steps inside, he lays a firm hand on the back of her neck. Gently, he squeezes, pushing her into the seat beside the driver. "You'll be all right, Asteritha," he says, though she's not sure if he is trying to reassure her, or himself. "You've been through this many times before."

"I know," she says shakily.

"When you get there, tell Dr. Whyck I want you prioritized. I need you back before rehearsal tomorrow night."

"Yes, Eir Patron."

"And Aster…" He looks at her a moment, mulling something over. Whatever he is about to say, he shuts the door on it.

The car rumbles to life. It pulls away from the Palas, hood stack spitting a sticky cloud of vaporized sugar, and Aster watches the Marshal shrink into the purple mist. As they turn onto Bast, she shakes loose her hood, opens her purse, and searches through it. She gropes through pill bottles, vials, tubes of lipstick. At the bottom, wrapped in an extra pair of gloves, lies her little stinger.

"You forget something?" the driver asks.

"No, it's all here," she answers. She leaves the gun be, pulling out a silver atomizer instead. She holds her breath and spritzes herself with a warm, bristly scent. A thin mist of flamewort and galvanic honeydew fills the cabin.

"Strong stuff there, vralen," laughs the driver.

"Good for the weather," she answers. "It'll keep you dry."

"Will it? Even in this downpour?"

"Guaranteed."

"Oh." He doesn't speak after that. The minutes pass, buildings slump by in the violet rain, and the top notes of her perfume peel away. As soon as the honeydew hits, she lifts the remnants of the handkerchief to her face and pretends to cough into it. She holds it there, breathing as shallowly as she can, mouthing a prayer through the threads. The driver doesn't notice—he

watches the misty street with drooping lids, with only the slightest look of disquietude. She considers applying another coat, then thinks better of it. She will resort to the gun if she has to.

Her heart twists as the Sanitarium comes into view. Through the misty haze, beyond the broad pillars of a Wherewithal bank, she can make out its tapered battlements, the fence's sharp finials left from its days as an arms-factory headquarters. The stench of misery wafts from every slitted window, fetid runoff from the harvest taking place in its deepest cells. When the car slows, her heart quickens, and she reaches back into her purse.

The cab pulls up before the gates of the Sanitarium. Aster holds her breath, one hand hovering over her face, the other over her gun. The wheels whine, the cab lurches, then continues onward, pulling past the drive and back out onto the ring of Nineteenth. Aster's grip relents as they roll along the peach-lined boulevard, then turn, and turn again, making their way toward the winding streets of Fog Hill.

"Where are we going?" she dares to ask.

The driver does not address her. His eyes, to her relief, have taken on the opaque sheen of galvanic stupor. He mutters something under his breath, but she can't tell what, maybe a to-do list, the names of dead relatives, or a poem he memorized as a child.

She says nothing, but lets him drive. Terrified, exhilarated, she grips the dashboard as they round the hill and descend into the maze of broken glass and mushroom caps that used to be Pleasantview Boulevard. Blank-faced, he pulls past a quiet park, along a row of abandoned town houses. He stops, exits the car, and walks up the front steps of what must've been his childhood home. As he disappears into the rotting doorway, calling for someone, Aster steps out of the cab. She pulls her hood against the drizzle and opens the back, digging for an umbrella.

Heart in her throat, she checks her purse once again, opens the glass panes over her head, and makes her way toward the nearest streetcar station.

★ ★ ★

The new Ash Moon is the best time to purge heresy. It must be done before the snows fall, or they will fall black. For years the Ascetics of Mongfestun have taken on this momentous task, so when the clouds pass over the Sawteeth, they leave them white as an acolyte's robe. The purity of the river valley depends on this merciless cleansing, now more than ever. Apostasy is on the rise, one among the many harrowing signs that the world is trying to begin again. The rate of Catoptric baptisms is increasing (far more often fatality than salvation), and somewhere in Tiliard, Gilde Vernhardt is laying the foundations for what will become standard alchemical practice. It's only a matter of time before the witches take over.

Still, even dressed in the angry red robes of an ancient Mongfestun friar, Guy can't quite muster the enthusiasm to torture reform out of the sorceress. She bends over the couch, hindquarters raised in an imitation of her cult's most sacred ritual, a ritual that has, unsurprisingly, led to their exploding numbers. Chief Inquisitor Argon the Chaste stands over them, one hand holding the witch's hair, the other offering his monk a leather paddle. Justice is nigh.

Guy's arm aches. When he brings it down onto the heretic's buttocks, all he hears is the crack of a nozzle.

"Harder, my son," Argon says.

"You're all fools," gasps the sorceress. "Your God is gutted. That's His blood in the river—"

Guy brings the paddle down again, shivering at her gleeful vibrato.

"*Harder,*" commands the Inquisitor.

"You're dead," moans the witch, maddened by her erotic torture. "He's abandoned you—"

He raises the paddle again. A large hand catches his wrist.

"Son," the Chief Inquisitor says. "You're distracted."

Guy only frowns, because like any dedicated monk, he's removed his own tongue lest he ever speak a falsehood.

"I know that look, friar," says the Inquisitor. Gently, he takes the paddle. "Do you have something to confess?"

Guy shakes his head. If this monk has any misgivings at all, they are not about an exterminator born a thousand years in the future, well after his monastery was converted to a military reformatory, changing its function but retaining its propensity for flagellation.

"Confess," the Chief Inquisitor says. He brings the leather down almost as an afterthought on the heretic's backside. "You have doubts, my son. This is natural, in times like these. But without hardship, there is no resilience. It's what God tells us. Look at the hardships He's endured." He swings the paddle once more, eliciting a giddy shriek. "And yet here He is."

"Your God is dead," moans the heathen. "Dead and broken."

"He dies every month," the Inquisitor agrees, reaching for a rubber gag on the coffee table. "But He always rises. Seasons move by the blink of His eye. Kings rise and fall by His watch." He fits the gag between the blasphemer's teeth. "The cycle is fleeting; the cycle is eternal. Transient and permanent. No matter how God may look one day, He will change the next. No

matter His shadows, He will always return to His full light. His blood will flow through our valley. His blood gives and takes life. Endless and always."

The lines are obviously lifted from one sermon or another, recited with the bland confidence of repetition, but Guy finds comfort in them. He can't help leaning into the Inquisitor's arms, resting his face against the soft leather of his harness.

"Oh, my son." A strong arm wraps around him. Lips meet his forehead. "It's been a tough season for the whole city. Come to confession."

"Yes, Father," Guy mouths, though he knows he won't.

The Inquisitor releases him and turns back to their captive, who moans through her gag, adamant in her heresy. The Ascetics have no choice but to burn her as a witch—lightly, across the breasts, with scented candlewax.

★ ★ ★

That night, as the shattered void of the new moon crawls across the river's surface, Tyro lies curled in dreamless sleep, and Dawn lies rigid in sleepless dreams, as he does every month, tormented by the stench of Fauniche perfume and patchouli candlewax wafting from his bunkmate. Guy is trapped in between, tossing and turning as his nightmare morphs into a distorted memory.

He is twelve. In sixteen months he will be fired, stripped of his contract and sent back to Strangleroot, but tonight, the usher known as Hock is working hard. He obediently hides himself until intermission, when he is relieved of his blindfold and commanded to bring wine and a cigar to the Secretary of Internal Reform, a man infamous for his exactitude, demanding the same box, the same tobacco, and the same bottle of plum wine, no matter what is playing.

"You plebeian," jokes the Sommelier Laureate as Hock lights his cigar, "you know the '88 doesn't pair well with historical dramas."

"Sure it does," says the Secretary. "If you have any taste."

Hock bows and makes to go, but the Secretary's hand grabs his collar and wheels him around.

"Wait," he says. "Garçon. Taste this."

Hock stares at the cigar thrust toward him, end softened with saliva.

"Taste it," the man repeats. "Tell me if it's eastern perique." Obediently, Hock opens his mouth, and the Secretary places it between his lips. "Go on. Tell me."

He inhales. His throat burns, his taste buds wince. He pulls back to cough, and the Secretary's hand follows with the cigar.

"Not like *that,*" he hisses. "Idiot. *Taste* it. Try again. There—*again*—what does it taste like to you? Blacktree? Starkleaf?"

Hock can't answer. He's only ever smoked a pinch of third-eye dust, and only as a dare.

"Again. Does this taste *anything* like eastern perique?"

"I don't—know," he hacks, looking to the Secretary's colleague for help. "I don't know—"

"All of it. *All* of it. Tell me if there's a single fucking leaf of eastern perique in there."

"Leave the poor kid alone," says the Sommelier.

"I—" Hock's stomach turns as the Secretary pushes the cigar back into his mouth.

"Smoke it until you can tell."

Swiftly, he learns to lie. "No, Eir Patron," he says through his next bout of coughing. "That's not—eastern perique."

"See? It's not so hard to tell. Now, go get the correct one. I don't pay an arm and a leg to be served this shit."

Hock flees the booth, smoke heavy in his throat. He barely makes it ten steps before he doubles over, mouth burning. He tries to escape the smell, but the farther he gets from the Secretary the thicker it becomes. Even as he stumbles past the booths, crawls down the stairs, flattens himself against a stained glass window, mouth searching for a crack, he can't seem to get a good breath.

A hand grasps his shoulder, shaking him. He jolts, gasps, and rolls to his side to find the apartment filling with black smoke.

MARCH OF THE THIRD AUTOTOMIC BRIGADE

Every step Aster takes is another violation of her contract, each minute of truancy a year of labor she will owe her patron. But now, with the air coming clear and sharp in her lungs, she stuffs away her guilt, her terror, and tells herself an invulnerable man has no use for loyalty, no matter how naturally he commands it.

It's well past dark by the time she reaches Rebirth, trotting along the boulevard cloaked in a raincoat and essence of creeper moth. Rain patters against broken statuary and mushroom caps, browning the ivy and shriveling the lilacs. Exposed skin stinging, she folds her umbrella and ducks past the broken statuary, climbing the steps to Mallory's portico.

The door, by virtue of being a melted chunk of sap, is open. The lights are on in the foyer, but when she calls into the house, no one answers. Spores shudder down from the chandelier, and rain drips through the fissures in the ceiling. She hugs herself, fighting off angry tears when she realizes she's missed him—but she's determined to wait, alone and cold and dauntless as a dog, for him to return from whatever show or scheme occupies his night.

When she steps into the foyer, a silverfish skitters past, circling a small table at the base of the stairwell. A tray of cocktail fixings sits on it, generously and, upon further inspection, recently used. Aster strains her ears. Muffled laughter, and the tones of a phonograph, creep in from above.

Aster ascends the stairs, following the sound of Mallory's southern cadence, and, as she creeps toward the bedroom, what she realizes is Elspeth's laugh. She removes her shoes by the phone, then leans against the door, slightly ajar. She peers through the crack, and her heart tightens. After a few seconds of watching the two figures in the flickering lamplight, she releases a despondent sigh. At least she is not the only betrayer of the evening.

"You really should try to get along," Mallory says. He reclines on his side, one leg exposed, draped in Elspeth's emerald wedding gown. A half-completed masterpiece, the fabric ripples with jewels, with the haphazard shapes of his embroidery. He sports an imperial headdress, and his silk gloves rise nearly to his shoulders. In his right hand he holds a sheathed rapier, in his left, a snifter. "You and Dee have a very similar wit."

"That's the problem," Elspeth replies, stroking her canvas. "You should've seen us at that last photo shoot. Like putting two cats in a box and shaking it."

Mallory laughs. "You liked his performance in *The Lilies* well enough."

"Please. It was *my* performance. Kneeling all calm and pretty with that hideous flower on my head. All Dee had to do was not get diced by Ludovico."

"Well, that's a great deal harder than he made it look."

"Yes—fine. But he's too … literal. He doesn't appreciate that any real insurrection has to be *abstract.* If he wants to be the poster boy for the movement he's going to have to put down the sword—"

Aster opens the door. A chill falls over the room. Immediately, Mallory stiffens, and Elspeth darts to her feet. Color draining from her face, she locks her eyes not on Aster, but the empty hallway behind her shoulder. "Who is it?" she whispers. "Who's there, Mal?"

"Crypsis," Aster says, with a twinge of despair.

"Oh, God. Don't sneak up on us like that." Elspeth collapses into her chair. Evidence of their artistic conspiracy lies scattered from the hearth to the bed: strips from her altered wedding dress, embroidery loops, dozens of sketches of Mallory dressed in finery from his father's closet. A portrait of him in her wedding dress sits unfinished on the easel. Despite the wildness of its strokes, it is a surgical cut to the Chancellor's dignity.

"Where have you been, Aster?" El says. "We both tried to call you."

"I … The Marshal kept me busy."

"Oh dear. You sound miserable. You must be soaked."

"Did something happen?" Mallory asks. He sets his saber aside and heaves himself from the couch, unsteady as he kicks off his golden heels. "Did you walk here?"

Aster's heart pounds, yearning for anger, for jealousy. She wants to demand an explanation, to pull the scraps of his handkerchief from her purse and shake them at him, but what she wants a great deal more is a strong drink and a good sleep. "Do you have a cigarette?" she asks.

"Of course, dear." Elspeth turns, knocking over an empty cocktail glass. "Oh, Mal, will you fetch my purse?"

He nods, helping Aster out of her coat. The way the gown hugs his shape sends her head spinning. "What's with the crown?" she asks.

"You like it? I found it in the closet. It's supposed to be Larbella." He drapes her coat over his arm and makes for the doorway. "I'll fix you a drink, vralen."

"Please." After he goes, Aster turns to Elspeth. They stare at one another as an arietta seeps from the phonograph.

"I told you he'd let me paint him," El says eventually.

"I didn't think you'd do it."

"This is my best work. I'm serious—it's the only good one I've *ever* done." She grins. "I might even finish it."

"When the Chancellor finds out, he'll get out the bone saw. And he won't stop at your thumbs."

"Well, are you going to tell him?"

"God, no. Florian couldn't torture this out of me." She stares at the portrait, as beautiful and incomplete as the rest of them. She can't say she's surprised, she can't even say she's displeased. But she is afraid. "What are you doing, Elspeth?"

"Preparing for my wedding. What does it look like?"

"It *looks* like you've gone insane."

"Makes two of us, love." She flicks a little paint in Aster's direction. "Does the Marshal know you're out dancing in the rain?"

"No." Aster removes her gloves and sinks into a chair, amid Elspeth's nest of oils and brushes. "He thinks I'm at the Sanitarium right now."

"Oh. Bold move, Aster."

She watches the doorway. "Not as bold as what you've done with that dress."

"Isn't it good?" Her grin returns. "Mal's a brilliant man. I'm telling you, that dress'll be my weapon."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well—" She opens her mouth, thinks, then closes it again. "Shit. Do I look sober enough to explain myself?"

"You rarely are."

She laughs. "Really, I'm just doing the exact same thing as you, dear. Fraternizing with"—it takes some effort to push out the final word—"undesirables."

Mallory returns with a tray and a pack of cigarillos. "Here—one for Aster—"

"And one for me, please," El says. She stands, swaying to the phonograph to change the record. "No more of this Aufhocker shit, Mal. I've got something new. Aster, you'll love this."

"Will I?" Aster asks, watching Mal set down the tray and fix another round. A bright, amelodic pulse fills the room as he passes Aster a coupe of something red and smoky. She downs it immediately, cringing at the heat. Mallory makes her another, then moves to deliver one to Elspeth. As he traverses the room, loose threads fan out from his unfinished needlework, rippling with the music, lifting their ends in response to something more substantive than static. Aster says nothing, unsure if it's exhaustion, alcohol, or something else that makes the lines of green and gold and blue writhe from the fabric like worms.

"This recording is awful," Elspeth says from the phonograph. "You really can't capture this Extemporist stuff, can you?"

"That's the point, vralen," Mallory says.

"We'll have to resort to something else." She turns, eyeing Aster and Mallory. "God. I'm crashing. I have a pick-me-up in my purse. Pure as a witch's ashes. You have a razor, don't you, Mal?"

"Bathroom."

"Great. I'm going to…" She tips, then catches herself, grasping at Mallory on her way to the door. "Help me find it."

He obeys, following her into the hall. After they disappear, Aster leans to watch the bathroom door slam shut. Something clatters behind it, the sink runs, masking a slurred conversation, then a soft, animal moan.

Neither returns for a few minutes. The phonograph drones on, emitting something less like music than the sound of a captive instrument suffering. Aster pulls the needle from the record, seats herself again on the chaise, and slips the handkerchief from her pocket, but what blocks her throat now is only her fluttering heart. She attempts to cough, can't muster the phlegm, and makes herself another drink instead.

A door creaks, then closes. Mallory reappears with an amused mutter, skirt hiked, sweat dampening his forehead. "Pick-me-up, she says. Sure thing. That girl is heavier than she looks."

"How … is she?" Aster asks cautiously.

"Abysmal." He collapses next to her on the chaise. "Everything missed the toilet but her forehead. Let's hope the bruise fades before rehearsal tomorrow."

"Did she make it to bed?"

"Bathtub. Crawled inside and refused to get out, so I tucked her in with some towels."

"They teach you that kind of chivalry at military college?"

"If you can call the beatings teachings." He sighs, leaning back into the cushions, and she slumps against him. The weight of the day, the week, the months and years, made a little heavier by drink, pull her into a kind of reverse vertigo. Head on his shoulder, she watches his threads spin and squirm while the world eases to a stop. As she takes in his scent, a hundred questions hover at the tip of her tongue, vying for precedence. Out of all of them, only one seems remotely sufficient.

"Who are you?" she whispers.

He shifts beside her, shaking off the headdress with a rustle of ivory beads. "Empress Larbella. Can't you tell?" His smile is beautiful in the flickering lamplight. "I've half a mind to wear this thing to the wedding."

She snorts. "You can't go as Larbella, Mal. You'll upstage the bride."

"Then I'll go as General Bianco. Dress in beetle-shell armor and carry two sabers with me."

"Wait, what?"

"Both hands at once—you know. 'To prove I might be as dexterous as I am sinister.'"

"That's—Mal, that's the Poet-King. And it wasn't blades, it was his fingers—'To prove to a *lady* I might be'—you know what, never mind." She glances up at him. Unbidden, Elspeth's face comes to her mind, the curl of a satisfied smile buried in towels—but it is eclipsed by Mallory's, by the smoky scent of his breath, his sweat, his dangerous twinge of heat. Aster takes in a breath of him, clear and sharp, and feels gloriously precarious, like she is hovering at the stump's splintered precipice. "Maybe it's better if I show you," she whispers.

"Maybe it is."

She takes his hand, tugging at the fingers of his glove. Slowly, the silk slides down his arm, revealing linear and speckled scars, then the faded ink band of BGS. She strokes his tattoo, then guides his hand down her front, down the length of silk, parting the alabaster beads of her skirt. She leans up, opens her mouth over his, and for the first time she is unafraid to share her breath, unconcerned that her lover will choke on her toxin, that his tongue will find not hers, but a sickly, ciliated third.

He turns, leans over her, pushing until her back rests against the curled arm of the chaise. His lips move from hers, down her jaw, her throat, her collarbone. He pulls aside her slip, navigating her layers of silk. His touch is gentle, devoid of urgency, soft and curious as antennae. When he slips inside her, it feels almost accidental.

"They teach you this in Mongfestun, too?" she whispers.

"This I learned on my own."

"Use … your thumb," she breathes. She moves against him, heat streaking down to her feet. Her toes curl, and she closes her eyes, imagining a slick layer of ink between them. As the pressure of his touch builds and relents, she sees him pressing his thumb against her like a contract, pledging himself to her, indebted and helpless, bound for life by nothing but a transient touch of a finger. It's a novel fantasy, but compelling—justice for all the lies he's told her, and for all the truths he hasn't.

"What have you done to me?" she sighs. "What is that embroidery?"

"Is this an interrogation, Vost?" he mutters, curling his fingers. She can't answer—she gasps and buries her head into his breast, into the silk weave of his gown. When her throat tightens, she is not afraid; when her breath catches, it is not by toxin but only a small moan.

"Why can I breathe—" she gulps in his scents, the wisps of tobacco and nightshade, the cherry liqueur on his breath, the earthy smell of his sweat, the slight sourness of her own. Beneath the hundred smells, there is something deeper, something moving under his skin, just at the edge of her senses. "Oh, God. What are you?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes … no…" She grasps at the ruffles of his dress, pawing at his back, bunching his hair in her fist. She clings to him as a madman might cling to a fleeting illusion, certain of both his solidity and his transience. Desperately, she breathes in every facet of him, all the disembodied little lies, the exterminator, the prisoner, the gentleman-soldier, the impoverished heir, the glamorous empress. "Shit, Mal. I could make a perfume of you—"

"Your contract, vralen," he whispers.

"Fuck my—" she gasps. He renews his rhythm, devoting his hands, then his tongue, to his task, and Aster loses her grip on coherence. "I'll—you have to tell me—tell me who you—"

Her mouth can't finish, because the rest of her does. A streak of heat crawls up her stomach, and she grips the back of the chaise. She shuts her eyes, legs shaking, and dissolves. Several times, she attempts to regather herself, to impose her limits again, but Mallory is relentless. She only manages to corporealize well after he sits up, looking her over as a pleased craftsman might his work.

"I think I'll need my handkerchief back," he says.

"*You* need it?" she sighs, sated but somehow deflated. Her heart patters back to a steady rhythm, and she coalesces, returning inch by tingling inch to the husk of her body. "There's not much of it left," she admits. "It's … come undone."

"Good." He wipes his mouth. "You've put it to use, then."

"What is that stuff, Mal?" she asks. "What did you sew into it?"

He leans over her, kisses one eyebrow, then the other. “Myself, vralen.”

“You’re being cryptic, country boy,” she sighs, but even she can’t tell if it’s with exasperation or satisfaction.

“It’s not great pillow talk,” he says. “Maybe over breakfast.”

Instinct forms a despondent *I should go* on Aster’s tongue. A sliver of dawn bleeds through the glassy window. She knows there is still time; she could still make her way to the Sanitarium, apologize for her tardiness, submit to the treatments, prolong her life, protect her body, save her work. She should excuse herself, march back to the Marshal and tell him everything she knows and even more she suspects.

“Don’t let me go back,” she mutters instead. She pulls Mallory on top of her. It’s a snug fit on the chaise, but he is warm, and her limbs are heavy. “Keep me here. Hold me hostage. There’s a stipulation in my contract that excuses absenteeism, if it’s a kidnapping.”

“Does it excuse the kidnapper too, Vost?”

She tightens her grip. “I can’t go back.”

“Dee’s got a place,” he says, smoothing back her hair. “In the midcity. You can stay there.” He says nothing more; no questions, no demand for reciprocation. He lays his head against her, basking in her heat, the soft breast under his cheek.

“Oh, God, Mal,” she says quietly. “Why did you have to get wrapped up in the Chancellor’s business?” Her breath burns with each word, and she fights back tears. “You can’t win. Whatever BGS did to you, to your family, forget it. Let it go. You can’t touch the Chancellor. Much less the Marshal.”

“I’m not here for them,” he says.

“Who are you here for, Mal?”

“Aufhocker.”

Aster’s brow furrows, her eyes open. Surprise quells her upswell of tears. “Come again?”

He lifts his head, glancing at her the same way Elspeth does when Aster walks into one of her verbal snares. His knee parts hers, his hand runs up her stocking. “If you insist.”

★ ★ ★

Guy bolts upright and struggles to free himself from the sheets. A sharp, chemical smell fills his nose, and he rolls to the floor, covering his mouth. His bunkmate is already stumbling through the smoky apartment.

He gropes for his sister, trying to piece reality together from the groggy fragments of the Secretary’s opera box. He drags Tyro out of bed, cursing whoever has left a stove on, or failed to blow out their reading candles, or played too loosely with phlogiston in the workshops. He divvies blame across half the workforce before he makes it to the door, shoving it open to reveal a billow of gray smoke.

Dawn tosses him a helmet, which he immediately pulls over Tyro’s head. He kneels before her, and with burning eyes and shaking fingers, positions the respirator over her face. As he secures the straps around her too-small jaw, her thin neck, he coughs out a desperate “Breathe—can you breathe?”

She nods beneath the glassy mask, and Guy shoves her out the door. Alarms shriek as they stumble onto the gangway, into the gritty wind. Before he can survey the barracks for the glow of flames, a helmet thumps over his head. With uncanny calmness, Dawn secures the mask, leaving his own face bare.

“Go,” he rasps.

Guy readies a protest, but his will shrinks under his bunkmate’s. He stumbles after Tyro while hirelings spill onto the walkways, some wearing masks, some covering their mouths with tattered sleeves. Their blackened silhouettes shriek through columns of smoke, monstrous and fleeting.

Bodies flow from the passageways of Borisch-Gorslung, vaulting between knobby walls and sagging gangplanks. A bottleneck forms beyond the plaza, where the crowd tries to cross the bridge, making for the main boulevard of Joyous Healing. Guy pushes Tyro toward them, but a strong hand grips his shoulder.

A crack rings through the air. Guy flinches, ducks, and pulls Tyro close, stomach twisting. When he raises his eyes, glancing to the bridge ahead, he knows it is about to collapse, and he will watch a hundred helpless bodies tumble down to the Catoptric.

Only one silhouette falls. It staggers from the others, hovering over the handrail before pitching into the void. A collective shout runs through the swarm, followed by another crack. The crowd unravels at its middle; half pushes forward, the other half retreats to the smoking barracks. Those in between waver, and in their confused hesitation become easy fodder for what Guy realizes are bullets.

A third shot, then a fourth. Smoke billows, bodies fall. The swarm splits again, and Dawn drags them back toward the plaza. He steers them into a maze of passageways, past the phone booth and the clinic, gliding between cover and exposure and cover

again. Silent, too calm, breath caged behind a reddened grimace, he drags them across the gathering platform, shoving aside scattering employees and nearly kicking down the door to Three's workshop.

She is already masked, with carbine in hand. Fans roar above her head, clearing the room just enough for Guy to make out her expectant frown. It's evident she considers them some kind of late.

"Trying to kill yourself?" she barks, throwing Dawn an extra helmet.

He pulls it over his face and hacks into the respirator. Before he can recover, Three's placed a nozzle in his hands.

"Is—" Dawn coughs as a few more shots ring through the weave of roots. "Fire—"

"Don't think so," she answers. "No heat, no light. And it stinks of propellant."

"What's happening?" Guy asks.

"You should know," Three answers. "You're in pest control."

His grip tightens over Tyro's wrist. "They're smoking us out."

"Picking off—" Dawn coughs. "At the bridge."

"Yeah, I saw," Three answers. "Just like urea wasps. Get the bellows hooked up to the pipes and wait at the spigot." Her tone is dark, tinged with irony. She's worked and struck and scabbed in the undercity for many years—she's seen, or incited, a few massacres in her time. "The real question is who's doing this. I have a few guesses."

Guy glances out the slitted window. Joyous Healing is enveloped in smoke, so he has to conjure the image of flashing helmets, scoped rifles, repeaters far more effective at clearing out two-legged pests than nozzles or knives. He imagines a regiment of Sreckt loyalists, faithful hirelings with elongated limbs and enraged, warped intellects. He can almost hear the company jingle pour from contaminated mouths, from gashes that had once been human lips.

"Moulène—" Three shoves a few phlogiston shells into his hands. "Elevator. Before everyone else gets the same idea. Dawn and I will cover."

"What's going to happen—" Ty begins, but Three leans down and grasps her shoulder.

"Listen, grub. I've got a job for you. You take your brother upstairs and you don't let him come back down."

"No—" Ty starts, but Three flicks her face with a wooden finger.

"I mean it. He owes me a favor still. A big one. And if you let him die, then *you'll* owe me that favor. Got it?"

Ty nods, tears in her eyes.

"Don't stay down here," Guy says. "The barracks aren't worth it."

"Oh, Guylag," she laughs. "You know nothing. This isn't about the *barracks.* There's a whole collection of contriver worms in R&D they're after."

A cold realization seeps over him. The murk surrounding the teratopod toxin at Sreckt headquarters begins to clear. An infestation with no bug, an unnatural gas. Too potent. Synthetic. Like an orchestra flattened into a wax cylinder.

"That was us," Guy mutters. "We've been extracting the toxin."

"Good job, Guylag," Three says, shoving Tyro out the door. "You're the last one up the gangplank. Welcome aboard."

The plaza is chaos; with the bridge to the boulevard of Joyous Healing staked out, those stuck in the barracks are left with few options for escape. Some try to crawl into the jungle of vines and flee to the next root, others fight back, turning supply closets into armories, lavatories into battlements.

When Guy reaches the suspension bridge to the elevator, the flow of bodies coalesces around him. He pulls Tyro close, suffocated and exposed in the churning crowd, unable to move and unable to stop moving. A dozen paces away, in the courtyard, the elevator doors shine through the smoke. They are shut tight, bronze panels invincible to the fists banging against them, vibrating with the deep, monstrous groan of the elevator descending.

"Careful." Three stops at the trough of the bridge, firing a blunt canister into the smoke. A response tears through the vines overhead, peppering the throng in shredded leaves. Something snaps—the bridge sways, eliciting a collective shout of terror.

"Go," Dawn says. "Push your way through."

"But you—"

"I won't lose you, Guylag," he hisses. "Go."

"Keep on," Three says, voice as forceful as the wooden elbow jabbed into his back. "Go report to Bertram. We'll be up after you." She pauses to fire into the smoky night. "Gotta keep this crowd in line—"

Another volley drums past the bridge, and something whizzes by Guy's ear. He ducks, one hand on his sister, the other reaching back for Three's mahogany arm. His fingers close over empty air. Desperately, he turns for her, calling her name. The crowd churns in shadow, obscured by dark smears on his mask. It takes him a moment to recognize blood.

He cries out, reaching toward the space Three had been moments earlier, filled now with jostling shoulders, elbows, fists. He gropes along them; none are wood, none are hers. For a moment, his heart stops. For a moment, he is sure the bridge ropes have snapped; he feels weightless, suspended, a hanged man dangling by a swiftly unraveling noose. Then he is struck sidelong on his neck, and his knee meets wood. Tyro screams in his ear.

His limbs begin to move again. Numb, ruthless, his arms push forward, his shoulder drives through the wall of bodies, his legs shove their way across the bridge to the elevator doors. Each second prolongs to an age, and through the daze of panic, he comes to understand the desperation of the sewer fox who chews off its leg to escape a trap, of hellrats trampling their own young to flee the exterminator's nozzle.

When the elevator doors emit a jagged shriek and rattle open, he stumbles into the safety of the shaft, pulling Tyro after him. As the car fills with terrified hirelings, he cranes his neck, hoping for any sign of Three or Dawn.

The former is nowhere to be found, but the latter stands on the other end of the bridge. With carbine raised and one knee bent, he looks like an old watercolor of a huntsman gazing over his grounds, adoring sight hounds at his feet. Even with his view obscured by glass and smoke, even with four years between himself and Ostlerfell, he is still in perfect form.

Guy's heart turns. Several of Dawn's names hover on his tongue, then evaporate, unspoken, as the doors close and the elevator heaves upward.

★ ★ ★

Florian stands at the foot of the dining table, with square shoulders and a rigid back. Constrained by his perfume, he waits for the Marshal to pour their water with silent dignity. He looks calm, subdued, thoughtful, just as he had been when he was young, when Sorav still maintained hope he might overcome the contamination that plagued the cohort of babies quickened during the deepest months of the Revival.

Aster has really outdone herself. Florian is a difficult canvas to work with, volatile and uneven, streaked with a wildness that he's carried since childhood and that has only strengthened with maturity. The years of discipline, education, punishment, and refinement did not exorcise his violent urges, only made them easier for him to satisfy. But this new scent wraps expertly around every part of him, tight as restraints.

Just looking at the boy, Sorav feels his old wounds begin to ache. *Where did I go wrong,* he sometimes whispers into the darkness of the midcity prisons. He never receives an answer, but doesn't need one. Every garden has a cursed seed or two.

"Sit, Florian," the Marshal says.

He obeys, removing a roll of newspaper from under his arm. The front page of the *Lunar Herald* boasts a picture of the Laurel Chancellor with his pet artists, Demetrius at his left side with lilies in his hair, one leg draped casually over his patron's knees, and on his right, Elspeth, bare-breasted in white gossamer.

"How are you feeling, Florian?" Sorav asks.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your concern, Eir Marshal."

A cold smile crosses Florian's face. The boy has a beautiful parry, a sharp eye, and a knack for interrogation, but acting is, fortunately, not one of his strengths. If it were, the Chancellor would've already poached him for Crypsis—or worse, the stage.

The door opens. Sorav expects the cook to wheel in their lunch, but the Surgeon General enters instead, all black mask and long black coat, carrying a wide envelope.

"Dr. Whyck," Sorav says. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong?" She waves her envelope in Maximian's face. "You tell me. You put out an order for the arrest of Davide Bateusse."

"How is that your problem?"

"It becomes my problem when you try to summon the dead." She slaps the papers down before him. "The deliverymen left a dug-up corpse in my vivisection suite. *Vivisection,* Max. That implies they're alive. It's not for autopsy. Especially not repeat autopsy."

Maximian pulls the folder toward him.

"The report is already complete," Whyck says. "Died a few years ago. Coronary artery occlusion."

Sorav sorts through the photos as his heir looks on.

"Found stiff in his big leather chair," Whyck continues. "Nothing too strange, from the outside. Men like him die of those kinds of infarctions all the time. Only one thing was odd."

As Sorav looks through the photos, a cold sweat pricks at his forehead. Bateusse's face is sunken, his eyes are closed, his mouth is drawn taut almost in a slight, satisfied smile.

"When they opened him up," she says, "they discovered a pearl in his coronary vessel. Or something that looked like it." She crosses her arms. "A Reverend Father killed by a pearl. Maybe came from his own collar. Who knows how it got there."

Sorav pales. "Are you sure?"

"About the pearl?"

"About him being a clergyman."

"Well, no. He was laicized."

Sorav looks back over the pictures. The wisps of mayfly cling to his skin, but it is not quite enough to drive off the resurgence of memory, and of loathing. He is personally responsible for this man's exile.

"I should've killed the bastard," he growls.

"Well, you might've." Whyck shrugs. "What they found in his heart—they think it embolized from something he carried with him from the Revival. Some sort of plaque, transmuted by ecdytoxin. Who knows. There were stranger deaths in those days."

"What's the deal with the corpse?" Florian asks.

"He's vant Passand's father," the Marshal answers.

This seems to pique his interest. "Who's vant Passand to you?"

"I think he means to kill me."

Something passes over Florian's face, more subdued than a grin. "Well, he can get to the back of the line."

The Marshal doesn't expect to laugh at this, but he does—with bitterness, and a certain relief. Mallory is, after all, just another boy with another grudge, another vengeful son of a dishonored family, a princeling angry that the Revival stole his monetary or cultural inheritance. Yet more proof that Sorav should never have stayed his hand. One always needs to eradicate the eggs with the brood-parent, else the problem will only repeat itself.

Sorav closes the folder. "Thank you, Dr. Whyck."

"If you need anything more," she says, "feel free to call someone else."

"Nichola, wait a moment," Sorav says as she makes for the door. "How is Aster?"

"Who?"

"Asteritha Vost. She should come home tonight. I need her to dress me for rehearsal."

"Vost?" The Surgeon General hovers in the doorway, tapping the chin of her rubber mask. "Vost … with the lungs. I don't have her. I haven't seen her for years now."

It only takes a second for Sorav to understand. He turns his eye to his successor, who wears a pleasant, expectant look. It's the same he wore as a child, chasing creatures to pin, first in the Sanitarium gardens, then the Palas's.

"Send me out," he says. "I know where she is."

"Do you?"

"Two birds with one stone, Eir Patron. I'll take care of vant Passand before you're back from rehearsal."

"This one is personal, Florian."

"Not just for you, Eir Patron." Florian's fists are balled under his chin, his eyes sharp, straining against his perfume. An animal, leashed, caged, begging to ply his art—Sorav's chest tightens with a twinge of sorrow.

"Take an outfit of Tender Guard," he says. "I want vant Passand alive, and with his tongue still in his mouth. Anything else is fair game."

Florian's grimace resolves into a smile.

"And for God's sake, use something more practical than a sword. You always leave such a mess."

* * *

Rain patters the windows of Borisch-Gorslung's overcity headquarters, dousing gargoyles and legends, from the Old Bailey Worm to the Mammoth Stag, sawlike pincers open in a marble roar. As Guy leans against the window, listening to the statuary dissolve in the rain, Tyro crouches in the corner with her mask on, preferring to cry into her respirator than into the tense din of Bertram's office.

Undercity hirelings spread around the top floor, though the flow of escapees has halted after a half dozen trips, when the overloaded car snapped a cord and wedged itself somewhere in the midcity. Exterminators collapse on meeting tables and couches, heavy with questions and bad news. Neither Dawn nor Three is among them, so Guy takes it upon himself to report everything he knows, which is clearly much less than Bertram.

"Franz. Fucking little *fucking* Franz," the man hisses. He paces behind his desk, suit pressed, collar upturned like hackles. He looks as if he has just been called in from a show rather than from bed. "That *shit.* That little cunt. I want his thumb. I want it here—I want it in my hand, with or without the man attached. Get me Reames. Someone get me *Reames.*"

He addresses no one in particular, and everyone responds. The secretaries and copyboys mutter assent, the custodian wheels away his tools, security men dance off into the hall.

"Where's your captain, Guylag?" he asks.

"A—" The word sticks in his throat, the same one that orbits those unseen, unproven deaths, when exterminators disappear down a shaft or are swept up by the Catoptric, bodies lost to disintegration or devourment. He can only whisper, as if that will make it any less true. "Absent."

"Shit." Bertram deflates, falling back into his chair. "I *wanted* to do this right. I didn't want this to get ugly. But Franz fucked

up the timing. Always the *timing,* isn't it? I guess we're going to have to break out the new equipment."

When a figure appears in Bertram's doorway, tall and broad, Guy's heart stutters. It's not Dawn, but it's not quite a stranger. He has the same green gaze as Bertram, though a vastly different bearing. He is wide, handsome, and hirsute, black hair pulled back from a brow that could demolish a wall.

"Reames." Bertram stands and embraces the man. "Thank God. Is the root still attached? What have we lost?"

"Not much. Three teratopods. Seven tranquilized. We're bringing them up now."

"And the smoke?"

"Just smoke. Sreckt 7B-899 for mice, hornets, and uninvited solicitors."

Bertram breathes a sigh of relief. "Finally got Erik on the phone. Even he doesn't know who Franz has hired to kill all of us."

"From the equipment we've found, I'd say Metaldrip Defense."

"Oh, God, *Metaldrip*? Fucking pedestrian. No taste at all." Bertram clicks his tongue. "Uncle Mendel must be backing them. How many are there?"

"At least two hundred."

"Carrying?"

"Conventional shit. Lead, mostly."

"Good, good. Then this might turn out."

"It might, with the bastards you have at your disposal. One of your hirelings is holding the bridge with nothing but phlogiston canisters. Pretty much single-handedly."

"Dawn," Guy interrupts hopefully.

"Didn't catch his name." Reames eyes him, then moves his gaze to Tyro. "Goddamn. Where do you *get* these boys, Bert?"

"Nowhere near the University," he answers. "Guy, this is my nephew, Reames."

A frown rustles his black beard. He is younger than Bertram, but not by much, more like a cousin than a nephew. "Is this the one that killed the brood-parent?" he asks. "I don't know whether to murder him or kiss his feet."

"Maybe shake his hand first," Bertram says.

Reames extends a hairy arm, and Guy almost reaches for his hand, until a glint of mahogany catches his eye. A prosthetic thumb—two of them. Symmetric, cleanly cut, the amputations are purposeful. Not an industrial accident, but punishment for something, a mark of someone so far gone that not even hard labor can reform him.

Forcefully, Reames takes Guy's hand, looking him up and down. "Who's the boy?" he asks.

Guy glances to his sister. She still wears her helmet, too awed or terrified to correct him.

"Tyro," he says.

"Send him down. We could use small hands. We're barely squeezing out a drop an hour."

"No—" Guy starts instinctively.

"I'll do it," Tyro says. "I'll go."

"The fuck you will, Ty," Guy growls. He turns to his boss with a pleading look. "Eir Bertram—"

"Rickhardt will help you," Bertram tells his nephew. "He's got an artist's touch. Put his hands to good use—then give everything you extract, all of it, to the man holding the bridge. Let him use it however he deems fit."

Reames wrinkles his nose.

"I'm serious," Bertram says. "Rickhardt, go with him. Bell, you too. Get that elevator working again. And Guylag." He turns, gaze softening. "Dearest Guylag. Do you think you could get me a coffee?"

★ ★ ★

When Aster wakes, tangled in the sheets with Mallory, there is a shadow looming in the corner. Her heart leaps up, and she follows it, nose wrinkling for the smoky scent of Tender Guard weaponry or the subtle perfumes of Crypsis. She almost throws herself from bed, but the figure is only Elspeth, hair of the dog in one hand and hog hair in the other, standing before a new canvas. Cheerfully, she chirps the time. Four in the evening. Her first wedding rehearsal is in two hours, and the bruise on her forehead is just starting to turn green.

Aster falls back onto her elbows. Her head throbs as the events of the night reenter it, the blurred paint through her eyes, the gramophone's wail through her ears, Mallory's taste through her lips. She glances down at him, curled on his side and rolled tight in the sheets.

"Did you have a good time last night?" Elspeth asks. Her smile is coy, satisfied—mischief without malice.

"Almost as much as you," Aster mutters. "How long have you been up?"

"Since the crack of noon, darling. Woke with the urge to work."

Aster glances to the wall by the closet, where the wedding dress drapes over the easel. Mal's portrait peeks from under the intricacies of his needlework, a handsome smile under a smear of honey-gold eye. It is the closest to completion any of her projects has ever been.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready for rehearsal?" Aster asks.

Elspeth flicks her brush. "Shouldn't you be in the Sanitarium?"

Aster rubs her eyes. "You hungry, El?"

"Never. You?"

"Starving." Aster rolls from bed and into the rain-charged air. She stands, shaking out yesterday's clothes while Elspeth continues painting. She glances over the canvas and finds a stellate burst of pigment, unmistakably Mallory, but viewed from an eyeless angle, devoid of light or time. It looks, Aster thinks, exactly how he smells.

"It's beautiful," she breathes.

"You think so? There's hope for your taste, then." The bump on El's forehead glows with her chuckle. "Mal, get up. We're hungry."

He groans, wiping away sleep, pushing aside the sheets and underclothes. He throws on his tattered housecoat and makes for the closet, ignoring Elspeth as she repositions to paint him from a different angle.

"Breakfast?" he asks. "I suppose we ought to make ourselves scarce. Get Aster out of here before the Revenant notices his own cadaver is starting to stink."

"Should we go to that rotten little hole on Vaughn Street?" Elspeth says. "Aster, you'll love it. Wonderful band, terrible drinks."

"And stairs down to the midcity," Mallory adds. "Old errander route, just behind the water closet."

"We should stop for coffee first," says Elspeth.

"El, your rehearsal—"

"Of course, dear. It'll be highly suspicious if I show up on time."

The nonchalance of her tone both comforts and distresses Aster. "The Chancellor won't like it."

"The Chancellor will expect it. He'll be disappointed if I make this all too easy for him." She eyes her work once more, then pulls it from the easel. "I've no value as a tamed socialite if I do all the taming myself." She tosses the painting into the unlit hearth. "Aster, do you have any perfume on you?"

"Purse," she mutters. Elspeth grabs it and makes her way to the bathroom, leaving Aster and Mallory alone with the scattered portraits, the unraveled threads, the oddments and paint stains and scraps. She watches him pull a pair of bellhop's pants from the closet and swallows a sigh. "I did a poor job of interrogating you last night," she says.

"Well, next time, use the paddle."

She laughs, taking his wrist and pulling him toward her. She lifts his hand to her face, touching her lips against the dozens of tiny scars on his knuckles. "Aufhocker," she says. "Why Aufhocker? What is he to you?"

"Everything and more, vralen."

"God, Mal. Every time I think you've run out of bullshit, you open your mouth."

"I need perfume," Elspeth says, gliding back through the doorway. "Real perfume. All the ones you have are practically toxic weaponry." She stops at the old vanity, glances over the dusty bottles of Fauniche scents, then seems to think better of it. "Oh, fuck it. I'll go as myself. I don't want to be recognized anyway."

* * *

News climbs up from below, the hours painting a picture of an evacuation evolved into a protracted siege. Joyous Healing is a stew of bullets and phlogiston, vitriol of Lun and BSPAF, Sreckt-brand darts and Metaldrip spearheads and the sweet, unmistakable scent of teratopod toxin. A defensive squad of two dozen congeals from the chaos, mostly ex-brawlers and convicts and exiles. A young Ostlerfell veteran is reported to stand at its head, chosen either by vote or by divine will. He dies early on, says one messenger from the lift, shot twice in the chest—while the next announces his latest stratagem. Frequent, contradictory reports suspend the corporal in a state of both victory and defeat, and Guy doesn't have the courage to ride the elevator down to confirm either way. He clings to uncertainty. He already knows he's lost Three. He'd rather not know about Dawn.

Mercifully, Bertram puts him to good use. While the exterminators in the root make heroes of themselves, Guy regresses to boyhood, shrinking back into an usher's skin. He buzzes around the presidential office with sleeves rolled up, fetching drinks and notes and messages. He hums to drown out the cacophony in his ear, the whistle of fumigants carried up the elevator shaft, the percussion of gunfire, reeds of peeling wood, Tyro's soft sobbing, Bertram's muttering as Guy brings him his seventh coffee.

“Of all contractors,” he murmurs, hunched over his desk, pomade crusted, Ostlerfell tie undone. “*Metaldrip.* Worse friends than enemies. Oh, thank you—” He sets the cup on a stack of papers already stamped with coffee rings. The man has not left his desk all night, shouting into the telephone, pen scratching messages and missives and polemics. In the corner of his office, Tyro sleeps under his silk overcoat.

“Look at this mess,” he sighs. “I need lawyers. *Lawyers,* Guylag. Soldiers. Lawyers with guns and soldiers with law degrees.”

“Sorry,” Guy answers. “I’m just the bug-killer.”

Bertram stands, stretches, and moves to the window, where a haze of gray sunrise threatens to light the horizon. “God, it’s dull out there. When was the last time you ate?”

“I don’t know,” Guy admits.

“Let’s fix that. Take a rest.” Bertram lifts the telephone, and a minute later, an errander appears in the doorway. “Bring us something warm, will you? Wine, too. Something dark, that goes well with rain and bad luck.” The kid nods and disappears. “Let’s hope Boris the Twelfth had something good stashed away. Well, go on. Sit. A soldier lives or dies by his last drink, after all. Who said that? Chancellor Marseea?”

“General Bianco,” Guy answers.

“Of course, of course. *Larbella*—God, that was an *opera.* Drovick was in jail for that one, wasn’t he?”

“And for *Poet-King*.”

“That one, too?” Bertram downs his coffee. “Why is everything good written from prison, Guylag?”

“Nothing else to do, I guess.”

Bertram swivels in his chair and offers a sad smile. “You know, your captain told me you’ve got the whole Tiliarder canon in that head of yours.”

Guy’s heart clenches.

“She told me you like to put flowers in your pocket and sing the classics to your sister. And that you’re *good*.” Heat creeps into Guy’s face, and that only broadens Bertram’s smile. “You’re a fop at heart, Moulène. And there’s nothing wrong with that. I thought I told you to sit.”

He sinks into the chair opposite Bertram, wiping an eye.

“Ah, kid. Take a napkin.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know you’re fine. But you also need a napkin. Here.” Guy accepts. “I know what it’s like. I’ve lost more than my fair share of friends, you know. Sanitation is dirty business.”

Guy offers nothing but a sniff.

“You know how I got roped into this shit?” Bertram asks.

“Through Crypsis?”

“Who told you I was in Crypsis? I used to run a perfumery. Wasn’t much for the art—Reames did the chemistry—but I managed everything else, from transport to sales. We grew our own herbs, tended our own bilge goats. It was a lovely business—even supplied Fauniche for a while, before she retired. And as it turned out, Sanitation is always looking for the kind of man who knows how to hide a stench. Oh, thank you.”

The errander returns with a bottle and two glasses. The label is antique, the cork grimy.

“Oh, this is a gloomy one.” Bertram nods. “Boris, you old poet.” He wipes off the dust and accepts the corkscrew. With a solemn squeak, he opens the bottle. The aroma is rich and bittersweet.

Guy fingers the stem of his glass as Bertram pours, laying one hand on his heart, waiting for his boss to initiate the traditional toast.

His proprietor only stares at him. “You drink a lot of this, Moulène?”

“Only sips,” Guy answers. “Here and there.”

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you? Did you taste for someone?”

“When I was an usher. A few paranoids in the boxes.”

“Well, tonight, we’ll take that risk together. To the brave men and women of Borisch-Gorslung.”

Guy mirrors the toast and drinks. The wine settles, warm and sad, inside him.

“A bit cloying, isn’t it?” Bertram says.

“A little.” Guy takes another sip. “Gently crushed, though.”

They both stare out the window, where day feebly asserts itself. A rumble rattles up the elevator, sending a tiny shudder through headquarters.

“Eir Bertram,” Guy starts.

“Yes, Eir Moulène?”

"What happened at Sreckt—"

"Was the brothers' fault. It was necessary. Justice—in the classic Vaughnian sense. If they're going to enable this infestation by making our job difficult, they're a part of it. It's just how Species Management works."

"And the teratopods…"

"Well, let me say this. An adequate gardener kills a weed. An excellent gardener makes a crop of it."

A shiver runs up Guy's neck. "How did you extract the toxin?"

"That, I couldn't tell you. That's my nephew's department. He's the only bioalchemist who can distill an ounce of sense out of this. I love that man but can't for the life of me figure him out. You know how family can be." He glances to Tyro. "I was the only one who invested in him. Believed in him. I put him through school, funded his projects. Rented him lab space, an apartment. Got him out of trouble here and there. Now I'm the patron of a latter-day Vernhardt."

"'With alchemy as my brush,'" Guy sings quietly, "'matter is my canvas.'"

"*Yes,* Guylag. Exactly." Bertram pours himself another. "Ecdytoxin is a gift. So many volatile compounds can destroy. Very few can create. It just needs the right hands to direct it."

The door creaks open and the errander appears, carrying some sort of stew, likely thrown together from whatever was left in the office. A note is delivered with the napkin. As Bertram opens it, Guy glances over to Tyro. She stirs at the scent of food, but does not wake.

"That bunkmate of yours is holding things down," Bertram says. "I still find it hard to believe I hired Corporal Flint. *The* Flint. I thought I recognized him—from that *Lunar Herald* photo, you know the one. With the hospital ship. I was sure the Marshal had him killed."

"He meant to," Guy says. "Lost him in the undercity."

"Just as well. Always thought it was despicable, what they did to him. Nullifying his contract—and for what? Being lucky? Being too damn good at his job?" Bertram scoops a forkful into his mouth. "How long have you known him?"

"Since we were kids." Guy fiddles with his food. "We ran the errand trails together for a few years. Until he was old enough for conscription. Or—at least, someone wrote down somewhere that he was. Neither of us really knew."

"Ah. 'Reality cowers before paperwork.' You know that one?"

"Vrenecker, *Platitudes,* number thirty-four."

"Perfect." Bertram sets down his fork and looks Guy over. The glance drags on into a stare, and Guy reddens.

"Did I get it wrong, Eir Bertram?" he asks.

"No, no. I'm only curious." He refills Guy's glass. "Do you know how Ostlerfell Blue is made?"

"No."

"Well, deep in those canyons, where the cliffs are the steepest, there grows a scraggly little type of woad. They've cultivated it for a few hundred years. Makes a decent blue. Then, about a decade before the War, a pest hits the crop. A beetle that parasitizes the roots, and it's cliff woad, so there aren't many roots to go around. The plant starts to die off.

"At first they try to kill this bug. They try every poison under the sun, bring up some exterminators from Tiliard, even. But during this project, someone finds out the beetle metabolizes the indican—that's the blue stuff—which it concentrates in its shell. A flash of color it uses to deter predators, when it's injured or stressed. And so, of course, they stress them. Injure them. Harvest them. That's our Blue. The desperate attempt of a tortured little parasite to keep death at bay."

"That's … sad," Guy says.

"Sad, sure. But not the point. The point is, the beetle still kills the woad. It's still a threat to the canyon's ecosystem. So is it a pest or a pleasure?"

Guy shrugs. "I don't know."

"Don't be a coward. Don't waffle."

"Pleasure, I guess."

"Exactly. Species Management clings to their little philosophies about toxins and structural damage and how to classify all these things. But it's so simple. A pest is only a creature that hasn't found its purpose." He leans forward. "And you, Eir Moulène, haven't found your purpose."

Guy bites his tongue, unsure if he has just received a compliment or a threat.

"If you'd trained early and had a patron, I might be throwing you a rose right now." Bertram shakes his head. "But that's what we do in this city. Let things rot before they can ripen. You know—when all this shit is over—I've got an alchemist friend who could take those marks off your arms better than any tattooist. You can go back to the Opera."

"I'm too old for ushering."

"Hah! I meant as a patron. Why should you not be the one ushered, for once? You're the only reason there aren't cockroaches crawling out of the orchestra pit."

Guy forgoes answering in favor of another sip.

"Shit, you'd make a better impresario than—don't laugh—I'm serious. You've clearly got more knowledge of the art than half the swine I share those boxes with. You'd be able to bring new life to the place. I'm tired of them putting on the same shows each season, these Neo-Repressionists. *The Only Good Man,* again and again and again."

"I have heard it's been stale lately," Guy admits.

"Stale? It's been *dead.*" He tops them both off, emptying the bottle. "Yours would make a great underdog story, don't you think? Perfectly feasible. Empress Larbella began her career as a prostitute. Albrecht Vaughn was born on Broken Teeth."

"Is that really true?"

"Who cares? My point stands. You're not made for this business. You belong upstairs. And that one"—he gestures with his fork at Tyro, lowering his voice—"belongs in Crypsis. Been awake for the past hour. Absorbing every word."

Guy glances over his shoulder. He half expects Tyro to stiffen at the accusation, to lift her head and deny the charges, but she sleeps on—or pretends to.

"She's restless," Bertram says. "I'll make her a contract. Keep her busy. Short-term. We'll start her off on something easy. Chem prep, or paperwork."

Guy gulps. "She can't read."

"She'll learn, then."

He hesitates over his next bite. He shivers with something akin to shame. Jealousy, maybe—while he had to teach himself with lettered seating and playbills and blocking notes, she will learn deliberately, with instruction.

"I won't pressure you," Bertram says. "That's the last thing I want to do. But Reames is right. We could use some small hands down there."

THE LILIES WRETCHED

The rotten little hole on Vaughn Street turns out to be the remains of a felled clock tower, peppered with shattered glass and twisted knots of Revivalist statuary. The place is a shambles, and all the more fascinating for it. Rot oozes from every pore; gears creak aimlessly, mossy pendula ease through the churning mix of steam and smoke and the palpable stench of blooming corpse flowers. Drinkers, artists, the washed-up and the up-and-comers, lounge on reclaimed church pews and cinder blocks, dancers dangle from the warped staircases. No orders are taken; food and drink are delivered randomly and in abundance, payment is collected arbitrarily. The brass band is a rotating group of strangers, the music amelodic, ungraspable, diffuse as the liquid-thick clouds of smoke.

Aster, Elspeth, and Mallory swim through the haze, pulling aside dying vines and dangling sap-wires, and find their way to a pile of coffins that passes for a booth. “God,” Aster mutters, “I can’t see a thing.”

“Really?” Elspeth asks. “I can see it all.” She laughs and squeezes Aster’s hand, just as a stranger arrives with a trio of drinks and a leg of hellrat.

“What’s in these?” Aster asks, smelling the first cocktail.

“You’ll never know,” Elspeth says. “They don’t write their recipes down. Enjoy it, because you’ll never taste it again.” She opens her purse and digs through it. “Here. My pick-me-up.”

She produces her emerald pillbox, from which she plucks a few clumps of a greenish substance. In the dim light, Aster supposes it might pass for cocaine.

“That’s … wet,” she says.

“You need a razor, El?” Mallory asks.

She laughs over the bleating of the band and makes do with a dinner fork. “Here. No, no—don’t snort it. You’re both so artless. It goes through the gums.” She divvies the nuggets between them. “And don’t swallow. Whatever you do.”

“What is it?” Aster asks.

“Exudate of the third-eye moth.” She lifts a clump and places it inside her lip, and Mallory follows suit. “Leave it there, oh, five minutes. It’ll last for a half hour or so. Wake you up in more ways than one.”

Gingerly, Aster places the exudate inside her cheek. Almost immediately, her face begins to numb. “Oh, God,” she mutters.

“Hits fast, doesn’t it?” Elspeth asks. “Where are you going, Mal?”

He stands and vaults the pile of coffins, wearing a determined look, like a moth suddenly cognizant of a flame. “I have to check on a few things,” he says. “Have something to eat. I’ll be back in fifteen.”

“He’s always doing this,” Elspeth says when he disappears. “Always skittering around, trying to plan things. Too many friends in low places. It’s a hard habit to break.”

Aster vibrates, feeling brave, optimistic even, snug in this little alcove of decay, this insult to Revivalism. Elspeth is right; she hasn’t felt this awake in a long time.

“How long, El?” she asks. “How long have you been involved with this … Extemporism business?”

“A while, here and there,” she says. “I really took off after I ran over Mallory. Took off with my art, I mean, not my car. I’m not that classless.”

Aster laughs, knowing she should fear for her, for them both, fear the displeasure of the Chancellor and his Marshal. But here in the embrace of unfettered ugliness, the tyranny of the future simply does not exist. A long bronze hand endlessly taps the same hour on the shattered clock face. Breath hangs suspended in opium smoke. The band pauses to argue about the next song, then, wills clashing, begins anyway.

“Care to dance?” Elspeth extends a hand to Aster. “Just a quick one. Then I’ll be off to rehearsal. Promise.”

“I shouldn’t,” Aster says. Although a wheeze curls in her chest, she dares to think she can do it. She stands and spits her third-eye. Elspeth pulls her down the sloped tiles to a patch of dirt, where she removes her shoes and begins to sway. The music, tuneless, ripples as if through water; somehow, the phases of disparate tempos meet, birthing a complex, uncatchable rhythm. It is less a song than a state of suspended being, felt in the bones more than the brain. Stained glass rattles above them, set with motifs of Bacher’s dragonfly. The insects contort, coupling and disentangling with the music.

“Shit, El,” Aster breathes, caught up in the wave. “This is … really good.”

“You should hear it sober,” El replies.

As Aster sways, she closes her eyes, reaching for Elspeth's hand, then her hips. She melts into her, dissolving until she is unsure whose fingers are whose, whose feet are whose, whose is the sharp scent of sweat and whose is the whiff of tobacco.

"I'm not going to do it, you know."

Aster opens her eyes to see something she hasn't since the Sanitarium. Tears gather at the corners of Elspeth's eyes, branching, blood-tinged corals of toxin.

"Do what?" she asks.

"Paint the Chancellor. I won't finish it." El lifts her gaze to the moss and rot dangling above her head. "I won't be another of his attempts to be remembered. To outlive himself. That's all it is, Aster, everything I do—everything I paint. Just fucking baggage to force on a future Tiliard."

"El," Aster mutters, hands on her cheeks. When she dares to brush away a tear with a fingertip, it stings her skin.

"I don't want it. I don't want to be remembered. I don't want to rip off parts of myself and leave them behind. Picking off a little more every day and putting it up for display. Like watching your own corpse rot." Her tears expand, framing her smile like a shimmering mask. "It's not worth it. It's too steep. It's too goddamn steep, the price of beauty nowadays."

For some reason, a memory wriggles into Aster's mind, of the Marshal sharing a piece of old exterminator's wisdom, staring out his office window into the infinite green city-glow, running a white glove idly on the sill. "The smart ones, you know," he told her gravely, lifting a little exoskeleton the maid had failed to dust away, "they eat their molts."

Aster takes Elspeth in her arms.

"Listen," Elspeth whispers as the song shifts. Aster can't sense how, or when; she is buoyed along the notes as in a current. "This is what Tiliard is going to become. One way or another." Elspeth turns, guiding Aster's hands to her waist. Aster moves up Elspeth's back, her shoulders, feeling each hair rise under her touch, a coat of barbs and spurs and stingers, little cruelties she fires blindly at the world. "Imagine the things we'll make. Things that can never be captured, or bottled, or used. Things that are for us, that will die with us."

Drowned in the joyful music, Aster sways helplessly as Elspeth presses against her. She feels a cheek against hers, the streaks of burning toxin, then the corner of a mouth. She turns her head, following the curve of Elspeth's lips with her own. They hover, touching with nothing but breath, until Elspeth opens her mouth over Aster's. Sharp as ever, Elspeth's tongue invigorates her like the snap of a whip. She is suddenly overcome by the relief that her work, unlike Merrett's or vant Wron's, or even the iridescent regurgitations of the Mammoth Stag, will never be strung up and displayed. She will never be doomed to the celebrated limbo between death and immortality. Her art will not outlive her, no matter how they might try to flood it with preservative, to screw it tight behind glass; she will leave no monuments, no recipes, nothing but a pile of bespoke, decaying scents and an overgrown solarium that no one else can truly tame. *Life isn't worth living if it goes on without you,* she thinks, unsure if the lyrics from *A Gentleman of the Void* have emerged from her memory, or if a singer has joined the band.

Elspeth pulls away during a lull in the music, tears solidified to a crystalline sheen. "Dear, is my mascara running?"

Aster wipes a streak of black from the branches of stinging poison. "Not badly."

"Good. Can't show up too weepy for my wedding rehearsal. It might imply I care."

Aster laughs, a little too loud, now that the band has quieted. She squeezes El one more time. When she feels the soft touch of a hand on her shoulder, she turns, Mallory's name on her lips. Then a scent hits her, her own formulation. Chillbug and argentum.

"Evening, vralen," Florian says.

* * *

Joyous Healing is throttled in smoke. Fumigants and aerosols mix and bind and burst in the darkness; bodies fall from walkways, perforated with lead; seams of blue flames rip where volatile gases meet. The root blazes with color, with retardants and propellants and toxins. Canisters are launched from the battlements of R&D, whistling through the smoke and burrowing into wood and human flesh, each detonation a violent remaking. Men go blind from the beauty of the blooming lights; glowing patterns appear in injured flesh; screams rise as a chorus, perfectly in tune and with masterful vibrato.

Some die instantly. Others succumb within minutes, hours, to the overgrowth of their injuries. Some leap from the root to escape the next volley, some fall to their knees, surrendering less to Borisch-Gorslung than to the awe of the spectacle.

The root remolds in the rhythm of the firefight. A garbage chute becomes a stairwell, the clinic an arms depot, the corridors a shifting labyrinth. Shortcuts and battlements open at the hiss of a venomous canister. R&D, whittled to a handful, retreat to their laboratorial sanctum, where they extract what teratopod toxin they can. Nic tends to the workforce's wounds and Reames their weaponry, dropper of ecdytoxin comically small in his fingers. Gloved and masked and gleeful, he deposits minute quantities into canisters, mixes it with fumigants, sharpens blades against it, adorns the workforce like a lunar priest.

Dawn, unbeholden to commands, free to ply his skill and given all the tools to do so, comes to realize that in this strange,

chaotic environment, he can finally breathe. Though his face is covered by glass and respirator tubing, and his chest encased in a tight teratopod-shell vest, he inhales deeply, rhythmic and calm, as if taking in the breeze on the crests of the canyons. He breathes, and breathes, and keeps breathing—even through an explosion of phlogiston, through volleys of gunfire, through the jab of a Metaldrip spearhead. The terror of Ostlerfell returns, but so does the joy, so does the relief of familiarity, the thrill of pain and the rage of survival.

As he marches from the barracks to the rest of Joyous Healing, reshaping the wood with his chisel of ecdytoxin, he feels as if he has returned home. Slotted back into a place for which he had been molded since he was fifteen, a place he had broken every part of himself to conform to, only to wake on that hospital ship with nothing but scars and a dishonorable discharge. No family, no money, no future, no friends but those lost in Broken Horse Canyon.

When the door to his cabin creaked open, he had expected the worst. A superior officer sent to torture him with pageantry, or the furious Grand Marshal, or a representative from the League of Mourners, who would prefer, if only for aesthetic reasons, to see him dead. Instead, in came a familiar face. The errander was not an errander anymore; he was much taller, lithe, with a lopsided, handsome smile and debts up to his shoulder. They embraced, shared a cigarette, spoke about his new job at Borisch & Sons. As they exchanged the songs and jokes they had learned in the interim, as the years burned to nothing between them, Corporal Flint watched the sunrise illuminate that lovely face and realized, suddenly, why he had lived.

He retakes the cafeteria; he forfeits the dunnies. He claims the bridge and lays siege to the tenements where the enemy camps for the night, conquering half of Joyous Healing in one swoop. He is ambushed by Metaldrip spearmen, and he cuts through them like wet clay. When a rogue shot dislodges his mask, he discards it, tearing barefaced through the haze. For the first time, he knows combat as it should be, as they told him it would be when they first put a repeater in his hands. For the first time, he knows the ecstasy of sacrifice, the equivalence of death and beauty, the raison d'être of the Autotomic Brigade.

The siege continues for four days. They rest in shifts, or not at all; they take turns talking to the reporters that trundle down the elevator to document the corporate spat. They loot the pantries and shops on Joyous Healing, they loot the bodies of the fallen. Dawn recovers his captain's arm and, rageful with grief, strips her fingers and uses each phalanx as a bullet. When he flushes Franz Sreckt from his swarm of contractors, he gags him with a strip of her rubber tendon.

The ratty little man is cornered in the back room of a cobbler's shop, where he immediately falls to his knees, begging for mercy. Despite, or because of, this display of unrepentant cowardice, Dawn shows none. He pushes Franz to the ground, stuffs his mouth, kneels on his wrist and slowly, meticulously, cuts off his thumb. Two exterminators hold the man down while Dawn breaks the appendage. He disarticulates the joint, then slices through the muscle with a whittling knife. It comes away messily, in a dozen spurts of blood and a shrieking plea from its owner, but it is easily cleaned. He scrapes its edges, wipes away the blood, shines the emerald ring still encircling it, and carries it back to R&D, a small tail of tendon glistening like pearl.

★ ★ ★

Aster freezes. The din of the bar shrinks away, the blood drains from her face with the last of her intoxication. As Florian stands in his stark white uniform, sword at his side, a cold shock of recognition ripples through the venue. The crowd takes a collective breath, then begins to flee. Hats and headpieces scurry into the cracks, the music flickers out with the lights. Tender Guard helmets glow amber among the crowd, clubs crack against heads and knees and heels, but they don't deploy their nozzles. Florian has always maintained fumigants are a coward's weapon.

"Who is it?" Elspeth hisses behind Aster.

"I searched half the goddamn town for you," Florian says. There is blood in his sneer. His scent is a melange of misted terror, distilled from whatever interrogatees he'd forced to point the way here. "What have you been *doing,* Aster? Where's vant Passand?"

"He's not here," Aster answers. "Elspeth and I—"

"Should be at rehearsal." His eyes flicker from Aster's face to Elspeth's, widening at her branching tears. "Vralen—what happened? What has he done to you?"

"Nothing, Flo," Elspeth answers.

"He's hurt you," he says. "I saw, at his—hovel. I saw the heinous things you painted. You're not well, vralen." He rests his glove on his hilt and glances around the venue, perfume curdling. "Where is he?"

"We told you," Aster starts, but before the rest of the lie can come out, Florian's attention snaps to a shaft of light spilling from a nearby window. Without another word, he draws and throws himself through the crowd, a whip of white and silver. He cuts down two people before Aster finds the breath to scream.

Mallory materializes in the hazy light, drawing barely in time to redirect Florian's opening thrust. The two disappear into the glow of poppy smoke, concealed by the shadows of the fleeing crowd, the crank of defunct clockwork, the long silk bands rippling from the ceiling. When they reappear, Mallory has regained his footing.

“Stop them—” Elspeth hisses. “I can’t see them—”

Aster dashes forward with a desperate wheeze, following the glint of metal, the streak of white epaulets in the haze. As Florian advances, he leaves a trail of overturned tables and shredded silk and injured revelers. Mallory barely outpaces him, hurdling a booth of caskets and then pivoting to catch a pursuing strike, driven backward up a rattling brass staircase. Florian forfeits level ground with a malicious grin. Even a few steps below Mallory, he easily locks his opponent into his dance, a fatal rhythm of foot-taps and clangs and grunts.

Mallory is fast, and skilled, but whatever swordplay he had learned in Mongfestun, he had only learned; Florian, in contrast, embodies the art. Steeped in ecdytoxin since his conception, every one of his cells has been cultivated for this exact task. He is younger than Mallory, tireless and ruthless, and it takes only one off-beat parry to draw blood. As soon as Mallory backs onto a landing, Florian whips his saber across his sleeve. A thin rope of red streaks the air.

Mallory stumbles back, loosening his grip on his hilt. As he falters, Florian forces him toward the huge purple eye of a rose window, intent on driving him through. The little Impaler advances with merciless speed, saber tipped in blood and the threads of his opponent’s shirtsleeve. Mallory teeters, parries, wavering between falling to Florian’s blade or to the crowded street below.

Aster staggers to the base of the staircase, reaching into her purse for her stinger. She has better aim than most, but the two figures seem to shrink in the glassy light, down the tunnel of her wheezing panic. When a feint and a quick swipe draws a splatter of blood from Mallory’s forehead, Aster snaps the pearl safety from its place. The wood heats in her hand. She steadies Florian in her sights, rests a finger over the trigger, and is immediately tackled by the nearest Tender Guard.

The gun discharges. Aimlessly, the bullet wails through the air, and the weapon spins from Aster’s hand. The rose window shatters, spilling needles of pink light. Florian throws one arm over his head, but Mallory steps through the deluge, a merciless fury in his eye. He raises his blade, letting it drop from his injured hand to his good one, and swipes at Florian. His smile glows in the scintillations of glass.

Right before the Guardsman shoves Aster’s face to the floor, she sees Mallory’s blow. Neither graceful nor clean, it darts across Florian’s cheek, up his jaw to his nose; he stumbles backward, gash swelling with blood. Before he can regain himself, Mallory thrusts the blade toward his throat. The tip glides through his collar, then through flesh, and emerges from the back of his neck. Wide-eyed, pinned by his last breath, Florian hovers in shock.

Then, as Mallory withdraws, an elbow slams into Aster’s neck. Her cheek is pressed to the tile, and her arms are wrenched behind her. She cries out, twisting to see the Tender Guard rush up the stairs, clumping at the landing while Mallory flees across the catwalks. He is fast, leaping from beam to platform as if he had climbed in such precarity all his life. A few Guardsmen rush after him. One panics, cranks his cannula, and swallows the upper levels in fumigants, while a few more pull Florian limply back down the stairs.

Something cold scrapes at the emeralds embedded in Aster’s wrist, a knee presses the wind from her. Then, another shot rings out, too close, too sudden, and the Guardsman is gone. Aster’s head spins, her ears pulse with pressure, and she shakes as she is jerked to her feet. Long nails dig into her forearm, shoving her toward the rear of the venue.

“El,” Aster gasps, “did you—”

“Can’t blame a blind girl for friendly fire,” she says, breathless excitement in her voice. “Bathroom, dear. Go. I’ll talk to them. They’re not going to shoot the Chancellor’s wife. Especially not if she’s crying.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Second stall to the right, behind the cistern. Don’t wait for me.”

Aster blinks. She turns, compelled by an order too insane to be questioned. She struggles through the haze, past the cinder blocks and coffins and debris, and dives into the lavatory. She shuts the door, gathering herself as fumigants seep in from fissures and broken windows. She doesn’t crawl behind the cistern, but paces between the stalls, shaking with guilt. She circles the bathroom a few times, steeling herself to jump back into the chaos. She musters her courage, makes for the door, and shrieks when a shadow materializes from a fissure over a urinal. It’s only Mallory, shimmying through the crack as easily as any worm.

“Florian—” Aster starts. “Did you kill—”

“I did. And he didn’t make it easy.” He dangles from the fissure, then drops down. “Timing could’ve been better, but you do what you can. Come on. Before my third-eye wears off.” He extends his hand, a sinister light dancing in his gaze. The gash in his forehead bleeds in wild rivulets, down his nose, up into his hair. “Unless you want to stick around and see how the Marshal takes the news.”

“I have to. I have to help Elspeth.”

“She knows what she’s doing. Never met a better improviser.”

“She’ll need me. The Marshal—he won’t hurt me. I’ll be fine.”

He gives her a knowing frown, hand still extended. A thread of blood crawls up his finger, against gravity. The wail of a

siren shakes the walls.

"He won't hurt me," she repeats. "I'm … I'm a daughter to him."

Finally, Mallory's gaze softens. He takes her hand. "So was I," he says. "But that didn't save me."

* * *

The hours crawl by, but at a startlingly fast crawl. Guy waits, hurries, then waits again. He rushes to escort a reporter from the *Arbuscle* to Bertram's office, then twiddles his thumbs as their conversation unfolds behind a closed door. He runs down to the kitchen to watch the water boil. He blinks once, and half a day passes.

Bertram leaves and returns and leaves, grappling with lawyers and contractors and media men. Word of the siege of Borisch-Gorslung percolates across town, and most of Bertram's time is spent pruning its spread. Hardly a day passes before the vultures begin to circle, hungry for rumors of the new company's fumigants, patents, armaments.

Wherewithal, Inc., is the first to send a representative. Placid Sewage Treatment Company comes next, offering decontamination supplies at gouged prices; Fairsire Armaments offers a small, conditional slice of its soldiery. Even the Grand Marshal Exultant sends an operative to assess the goings-on.

"*Parasites,*" Bertram sighs, shoving the last contractor from his office. "Soot mites, bloodsuckers." He collapses in his chair and plonks his feet on the desk. "No forethought. No *vision.* They'd let Tiliard wilt like the rest of the world, if they could make a buck off it." He undoes his tie and leans back, pulling his hat over his face. "Shit, I'm beat. Recite me something. Ye bard of Borisch-Gorslung."

Guy does. He sings a passage from *Birth of the Deathbed,* a soft arietta, and it takes half a minute for Bertram to fall asleep. Guy watches him snore, then pours himself a glass of water. Next to the crystal decanter lies a preliminary hundredth edition of the *Manual.* As soon as he cracks open the spine, breathing in the scent of leather and binding sap, Tyro materializes beside him.

"Where's Three?" she asks quietly. "Is she back yet?"

"Sit with me," he whispers. He glances to his boss, then flips to the back of the book. "I got a story stuck in my ear."

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"Sit down," he says. The latest entry is the Contaminated Srecktman, a hideous, dripping illustration with pristine white margins. "It's a new one. This one is about a man who falls into the Catoptric. Sit."

She considers him, unimpressed. "That's not a new one."

"Yes it is."

"I've heard that one before. He falls into the river and dies at the end."

"No, grub. He dies at the beginning."

This piques her interest. Finally, she sits.

"He's a gentleman scholar. An alchemist, who sails to the edge of the dead world to find the source of the Catoptric."

"There is no source," Tyro says.

"That's what we think. But he thinks differently. The first act opens with him at a writing desk in his cabin. He's finishing his grand treatise, and he sings excerpts to the audience—about how he's almost unlocked the secrets of the river, where it came from, what it's really made of. He's so, so very close—" He pauses, and a bizarre melody sears through his ear. "He's on the verge of finishing his final thought when the ship's raided."

"Of course," Tyro mutters. "Pirates."

"Physicists, actually. Rivals from the University. They steal his research and sink his ship. The whole crew dies in the first scene."

"Then what's the rest of it about?"

"Well, they sail away with his manuscript, and the alchemist wakes up at the bottom of the river. It's a bizarre place—no fish, no plant life, just millions of tiny, dancing lights. The kind you can see on the surface at night during Hound Moon. 'Smithereens of God,' like Montresor says."

"Who?"

"Doesn't matter. What does is that there'll be this amazing lighting apparatus, with lots of mirrors on strings." He closes his eyes, and the stage expands before him, an iridescent mist of silver punctuated by fluttering jewels, bright as the toxin that flooded Sreckt headquarters. "And our hero follows them like a navigator follows the stars. He meets a few lost souls along the way. An old man's ghost. A lord's sight hound that fell off his yacht. The dog gets her own number."

"Stupid."

"Shut it, Ty. It'll be good. Anyway, he walks along the riverbed, because he can do nothing else. He can't climb up the banks, because they're smooth as glass. He can't flag down passing boats, because the surface is too reflective. He just walks

and walks, until he gets to an anchor. It's the physicists' ship—and you know what he finds there, right beside it?"

"The source of the Catoptric," Ty says.

"That's right. It's not very impressive. Just a crack in the ground. But when he presses his face up against it and looks inside, he understands."

"Understands what?"

"The source is a process, not a place. An experiment started thousands of years ago, by our ancestors. It's unlike anything he's ever seen before—or even thought about before. It's so complex and ancient that it almost defies comprehension."

"And the knowledge drives him insane," says Ty hopefully. "And then it ends."

"No, then it's intermission. When we get back, we're with the rival crew. They get their own songs and dances—I'll show you those later. The captain stays in his cabin, trying to decipher the manuscript. It doesn't make any sense to him. He tortures himself trying to figure it out—tortures the whole crew. The last bit of the last paragraph is still missing, the equation that ties everything together. One night, he's out on the deck and hears the anchor chain rattle. He thinks it's a river monster, but when he leans over the side to look, he sees a man climbing up it. He's scared shitless—it's the alchemist, still wearing the same suit he died in. He steps onto the deck and tells him he's finished his manuscript. The captain is paralyzed. He just stands there while the alchemist whispers into his ear, telling him the last equation of his treatise. The audience doesn't get to hear it—for their safety, of course, because what the physicist hears strikes such awe into his heart, it stops altogether. The laws of the universe slide into place so smoothly, so instantly, his mind can't keep up. He is so taken by the beauty of it all, he can't do anything but stagger around the stage, singing his final, bizarre, wonderful aria, and then…" Guy pauses to think. "He's sent down the chute to hell."

"That's dumb," Tyro says.

"It's not finished."

"I don't like it."

"Most people won't. At least when it first comes out. But it'll gain traction. Ten years, it'll be a classic. A hundred, scientific fact. I'm calling it *A Gentleman of the Void*."

A shout echoes from the hall. Guy jerks upright, as does Bertram. The voice is joined by another, and another, a flurry of hushed conversation, growing louder, then ceasing with a forceful knock on the office door.

"In," says Bertram.

Guy's heart hiccups as Dawn steps into the room, helmet under his arm, a line of bedraggled colleagues filtering in behind him. His face is grimy, the skin around his eyes stark white where he's squinted against the smoke. Red-brown stains stipple his chitinous suit.

Before Guy can embrace him, he strides to the desk and places something small and pale on it, something that brings a glow to Bertram's face.

"Oh, wonderful." He whistles. "Artfully done, Corporal."

He rounds the desk, takes Dawn's hand in both of his own, then pulls him into a rough embrace, paying no mind to the stench, the blood, the toxic particulates clinging to his iron vine.

"How was it down there?" he says, falling back into his chair.

Dawn smiles. When he speaks, his tone is pained but energized, a devastation so sharp it borders on exhilaration. "Incredible."

Bertram holds up the object, turning it in the light as if appraising it. "It's Franz's, all right. Bastard always had the worst taste in rings. Where's the rest of him?"

"You want me to bring that up, too?" Dawn asks.

"God, no. Just wondering."

"He's in R&D. Alive."

"Oh. Good. No point in wasting him." Bertram rolls the severed thumb along his ink pad, then pulls Sreckt's half-completed contract from his drawer. He presses Franz's print to the paper, next to Erik's. Before the ink dries, he is the owner of Sreckt Brothers Pest Control and Hex Removal, and all its subsidiaries, manufactories, properties, hirelings, and holdings.

"There," he mutters, examining the two neat prints. "How's that for good taste?"

★ ★ ★

Demetrius Prophet, like all the others, has left a sillage of beauty in his wake. The passages of the prison still resonate with the ghost of inspiration, with an echo of the magnificent. No matter the venue, no matter how scared or confused, a good performer can always slip into the deathless incorporeality of music. Or so Olaf tells him, and Olaf rarely makes sense.

The sound of his typewriter echoes down the twisted hall. The rhythm is hurried, joyless; every click as impulsive as

picking at a scab, each note of his harpsichord a drawn-out moan. Down in the depths of the prison, among the muffled howls of the incurable, the shuffle of monstrous criminals and the skittering percussion of pests, Aufhocker writes his newest opus.

His cell is larger than the others, adorned with countless luxuries accrued through his many years of imprisonment. A brass tub stands in the corner, next to a phonograph. Shelves slump under a decade of collected books. His sheets are silk, and a little garden of albino flowers crawls from metal pots. All this, and the makeshift stage down the passage, are Sorav's doing. Not that any of it has satisfied him.

When the Marshal reaches the bars to the cell and sets his torch in the sconce, he finds Olaf in his usual position, hunched over the typewriter with one ear tilted toward the door. A small bandage, tinged in red, is taped over it, recently applied by the Surgeon General's white-coated technicians (or Crypsis agents skilled enough to play them). They visit him every few weeks, gently pulling him from his desk, two pinning him on his side while a third perforates his eardrum, sliding the needle into the effusion and aspirating the toxic buildup. Sorav hopes at the very least it gives him some relief.

Olaf doesn't turn from his work as the bars rattle aside. He doesn't greet him, doesn't react until the Marshal gently touches the nape of his neck. Even then, he only blinks. Sorav doesn't force an embrace. He's long since learned the ugly pointlessness of that.

"If you have a request from my patron," Olaf says, candles flickering at his breath, "tell him no. I'm not rewriting it again. Not again. I'll take the beating, I don't care. I'm not writing in that fucking beheading. *The Marriage of Bertram* is finished."

"He really does insist." No answer. "We had the first rehearsal tonight. His fiancée didn't even show. They're still out looking for her."

Sorav hopes this at least might get a grunt of schadenfreude, but the indifferent click of the typewriter resumes. Sorav does not know how Olaf can work by such little light, but then again, the man hasn't seen the sun in the better part of two decades.

"Talk to me, Hock," he says. "Please."

"I'm in the middle of something. It's tormenting me right now."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's not coming together. It's not working in meter. It might be better as prose. Maybe a novel."

"Don't make me laugh, Hock. I'm not in the mood."

"I'm serious. Time for a new format."

"Your patron will throw a fit."

Olaf's chair creaks. He shifts, then circles his cell. The place is due for an expansion, too small to house all the years of the Marshal's bargaining chips, the instruments, artworks, down pillows. Maybe he will arrange to have another wall torn down, execute or release the man next to him and give him the cell. That might buy him a few hours of begrudging company, but it always surprises him how difficult it is to negotiate with a man who has nothing left.

"You owe me a conversation, Hock," Maximian says. "I gave you a dance."

"Fine." Olaf sits again at his typewriter. "What do you want?"

"Davide Bateusse. You remember him."

The darkness curdles at the name. "Sure."

"He had a son."

"Did he? He never told me."

"So I take it you haven't met him."

The clicking resumes. "No."

"Apparently the boy spent a good deal of his life in Mongfestun."

"Even pious men have unruly sons."

"Well, this one is out to kill me. He seems a polite enough fellow, though. This vant Passand. Reminds me of you."

This time, the typewriter stops. The murk shifts, the candles flicker, as if the cell is taking a cautious breath. "Who?"

"Eir Marshal."

A Tender Guardsman appears at the doorway. He wears a dark look, speaks with a low voice. He knows he is not supposed to interrupt the Marshal on these visits. "A word outside, if it pleases you."

Sorav withdraws from Hock's cell, sliding the door shut behind him.

"I'm sorry, Eir Marshal," the Guardsman begins, and Maximian can guess what he is about to say.

A tendril of dread unwinds in his gut. It is a distinct feeling, the same that overcame him the day Tyro died, that unfathomable blight of rage and guilt and hurt that festers only on the underbelly of love.

"It's about Florian."

III

The specter who comes as I go,
Who throws on the coat I shed
Know, as you puppet my rotting bones,
Decay is only growth unfettered.

—*Olaf Aufhocker,* Fleeting Lodestar, *Act II*

Ecdytoxin is God's gift to hell. The fulminate of the Catoptric, the living thoughts of a living river—that liquid mind left by our forefathers, unrestrained by structure, a quadrillion particles making thousands of times more interconnections, without which we would be barbarians, rotting among the flies in the high deserts, barren like the rest of the damned world. It is the Blood of God, the Water of Life, and ecdytoxin is wine distilled from it.

—*Dr. Reames Gorslung, "Dream Treatise"*

AUBADE

The Root of Joyous Healing is reborn beyond repair. The assault has left the place unstable, uninhabitable. Bridges lie splintered from fusillades, fumigants percolate its hallways, droplets of raw ecdytoxin drip down canisters lodged in archways and platforms. The floral tubs of the bathhouse wilt and weep, spilling poison from their gutted bellies. When the wind blows through the vines, a solemn dirge can be heard from several roots away.

On the day of the company's new christening, a day that should've been marked by celebration and confetti of paperwork, Borisch-Gorslung-Sreckt instead finds itself marked by slaughter and dispossession. As the wind carries dregs of ecdytoxin from the barracks, the workforce gathers what is left of their matériel, their suits and valuables, damaged *Manuals* and photos singed beyond recognition, and moves to the overcity. A half dozen at a time, they ride the elevator, and when their headquarters overflow and the workforce spills into the street, the company is forced, by necessity, to annex and occupy the nearby Birdcall Hotel. The concierge is unprepared for the midnight advance, and it takes only seven shots and a single canister of BSPAF to empty the building of bewildered guests.

"I won't refuse my people their due," Bertram Gorslung later explains to a reporter for the *Rhizosphere.* "They've been fighting this infestation for months now, and what do they get—an underhanded attack by a corporate rival. And the Chancellery is doing nothing to hold the aggressors to account. Metaldrip and Franz Sreckt have tried to undermine our service to the people of Tiliard. They're the reason this issue has gotten so out of control. They're the reason this toxin is contaminating our streets."

As his hirelings settle in the hotel, Bertram doubles down on his efforts to fortify Sreckt headquarters. A strange toxin wafts up from the building, raining particulate over the rooftops. Creaks of wood and the crack of marble permeate the night, startlingly melodic. By the time reconstruction ends, by the time the dust seeps into the shifting winds, the building is exactly what Bertram desires.

The foyer sprouts, reborn; stairwells are grown, rather than carved, along the walls. The front doors stretch and thin to two arched panes of golden glass, translucent as an insect's wing. New corridors propagate, budding into offices and workshops and armories. Bertram's own suite is a masterpiece, domed ceiling ballooning in stretched glass.

"It's perfection," he sighs, seating himself in Erik's old leather chair, which has twisted to exactly his dimensions. As he poses behind his desk for the photographer from the *Arbuscle,* Dawn at his side, he pulls a fountain pen from the drawer and executes his first act as president of BGS Extermination Company. With a flick of ink and a roll of his thumb, he declares war, on the streets and in the courts, on Metaldrip Defense Industries.

* * *

Despite what history will insist, pointing to the wound of the Conundrum Incident and calling it the birth canal of the Revival, it does not begin there. Like all events that seem sudden and momentous in retrospect, its true beginning is protracted, formless, and aimless. It begins with the occupation of a mid-tier hotel, and a slew of complaints to the Tourism Bureau. It begins with a few dozen idle exterminators, momentarily deprived of their regular shifts, gathering in the bars along Fifth Street. It begins with Guy standing in the luxury of his new room, alone and uncertain.

Bertram has given him a suite to himself, twice as large as his old apartment. Sap-powered lamps glow against green wallpaper, and a golden cast of Bacher's dragonfly hovers over a marble tub. The valuables of its last inhabitant still sit in an open suitcase: silk blouses, a few books, a silver razor, a bachelor's handkerchief with a small knot embroidered at its center. This guest had only just begun to sew the story of his travels.

Outside the window, particulates of ecdytoxin coat the glass with a silver sheen. "Don't worry about it," Bertram had assured his staff. "It's processed, and at such a low concentration it should be harmless. Still, I'd close the windows."

Guy does, flipping the lock and drawing the curtains, but he can still feel the toxin wrap around him, he can still feel it enter him, through his skin and nose and ear—*God,* his ear. It echoes with gunfire, with overlapped, disembodied drones and drums and voices. The cacophony relents only when he sits at the oak writing desk, plucking a fountain pen from the drawer and writing something aimless on the hotel stationery.

The pen glides with the satisfaction of a sigh, and the noise stills. He writes several of his names, several of Tyro's. Then, as he used to in the margins of the *Manual,* he composes a story for her. Hunched under the electric lamp, he scratches out the

first scene of *A Gentleman of the Void.* He pours himself into the words, swept up by his own thoughts, until the moon washes the dusty room with blue light.

Finally, when the clock strikes one, he forces the pen aside and forces himself into bed. The mattress is achingly soft, the sheets silkier than the bishop's. He rolls onto one side, then the other, spreading his arms, probing the emptiness where other bodies should lie. It takes an hour or so for sleep to drift in, and the moment it does, he enters his mother's old shop on Broken Teeth, where he returns after the impresario discovered his theft of hundreds of shows and summarily fired him. Thirteen years old and snapped with a black band worth fifty thousand marks, he comes home to find his mother trying to thread Tyro's hair into a spool.

"Help me," she growls with Three's voice, yanking at her daughter's curls with a hundred short legs. "Wigmaker will be here any minute."

When he wakes the next morning, he is called to his first job as a lieutenant specialist in BGS. A nest of Metaldrip stragglers, as toxic and malformed as their Sreckt counterparts, has been uncovered at the end of Finch Street, stocking supplies for a counteroffensive.

Dawn leads the first advance, welcoming Guy into his regiment with a long, tight embrace, assuring him he's in safe hands. Fresh from his victory on Joyous Healing, Dawn will not let one of his men fall. Not on a routine extermination job.

Armored in teratopod terga and the sigil of BGS, they march down Finch Street, searching for the residue of a soldierly infestation—boot prints, cigarette butts, racy foldouts flapping in the wind. They begin their sweep with BSPAF, flushing out seventeen hellrats and a lone soldier. They find the rest in the attic above a haberdasher's and flood the piping with phytothrin. The soldiers disregard the warning, staked out in their iron vine and respirators, sniping at BGS exterminators from stairwells and shattered windows. What they can't disregard is the ecdytoxin that comes next.

The cloud envelops the building like fire, warping wood and stone and metal. A few men are crushed in the twisting halls as the building grows and mutates; the others are wrung out as if from a cloth, where Dawn easily picks them off. Guy does not attempt to follow suit. His nozzle is too heavy in his hands, and his aim too shaky. His ear throbs, ringing so loudly he does not hear Dawn ask him what is wrong.

As the days progress, waves of fumigants percolate Finch Street. The advance is one-sided. Metaldrip sends its men into the clouds of toxin with the best armor, the latest respirators, with eager, desperate recruits from Strangleroot, to no avail. Conventional weaponry wilts at the touch of the toxin. Enemy gunfire melts in the advancing haze, bullets shed their jackets midair, ballooning from lead seeds in great bursts of petals. Bayonets resonate like tuning forks, phlogiston grenades leave ashen gardens in their wake.

Newspapermen buzz behind the BGS specialists; bold civilians brave the streets to watch the aurorae of thermal bombs diffuse, the cobblestones shed and molt, traffic lights burst and release fragments of their bulbs like spores. The battles are beautiful and lively and brilliant, but only half as much as the man who leads the brigade. Word of the resurrected Corporal Flint begins to spread, the loyal soldier whom the Exultant had deprived of his due.

Midway through the fumigation job that will later be called the Row for Splinter Row, the Laurel Chancellor calls the Marshal Exultant. The Surgeon General, who has been seeing to the Metaldrip men and civilians caught in the skirmishes, has reported a plethora of beautiful deaths. The corpses of soldiers affected by the fumigants are so strange, so pleasingly fractal, the Surgeon General hangs them up in the Ministry of Aesthetics. Crypsis officers observe the works with notebooks in hand. Many of them have survived enough coups to recognize an unprecedented artistic development. It seems Mendel Gorslung's nephew has decided to dabble in the avant-garde.

"Ready the bayonets," the Chancellor growls to the Exultant over the phone, digging his bare toes into his Ostlerfell Blue carpet. "It's fucking debut season again."

* * *

A hundred feet below the city's surface, R&D settles into the seized Sreckt factories. Dr. Reames Gorslung heads the occupation, reveling in the humming conveyor belts, the pistons pounding a beat through waterscapes of bioalchemical vats. He makes liberal use of Sreckt's famed library of patents. He makes use of the distillation tanks, converting them to terraria for his contriver worms. He even makes use of Borisch's company physician. Though rarely sober, her background in entomology proves useful, as well as her knack for acquiring specimens from the workforce, from skin to blood to cadavers.

For the first time in his life, he can work uninterrupted, freed from inspection and the law and the tyrannical standards of the University. The hours are peaceful, made numberless by the dark of the midcity. His meals are delivered alongside ingredients for fumigants. Each snifter of cocaine is accompanied by a barrel of gunpowder.

His first shipment from Orphanwell comes in the third week of Beetle Moon. A dozen of them, all under fifteen. He goes down the line, examining their hands as a Dagdrun vintner might feet. There is one child who doesn't belong, who is not

shaking like the others, but stands with a defiant frown at the end of the line. It is the same one Reames had seen in his uncle's office the night of the Metaldrip raid. Maybe an errander, legit or under the table, boy or girl or both or neither—he can't tell and he doesn't care.

"What are you doing in with this runoff?" he asks. "Aren't you Dawn's kid?"

"I'm no one's kid."

There's something fascinating about that fearless glint in the child's eye—a little madness and a lot more hunger. "What's your name again?" Reames asks.

"Tyro."

"Is that your work name?" He tugs at the kid's sleeves, revealing bare arms. No black marks, no contracts. Sturdy wrists, slender fingers. A sin to waste. "Do you have a work name?"

"No."

"Well"—Reames offers his nicest grin—"would you like one?"

★ ★ ★

All his life, Guy has tried to pay no attention to the mechanics of the overcity. He has no use for speeches that are not sung, no use for kings that have not faded into legend. But as Metaldrip skitters for the shadows, retreating to their headquarters, as he poses behind Bertram for the *Lunar Herald*'s photographs, he realizes he has trapped himself in a half-written history.

His head pounds with the percussion of detonating canisters, his eyes throb from light zigzagging down the maze of changed streets, the piles of changed bodies. When he doffs his armor for the night, his skin tingles, his ear rings. While Dawn and the others roister victorious in the bars on Fifth, he makes his way through the Birdcall Hotel, to the broom closet Tyro has claimed for herself.

She sits on the floor, sharpening a knife. She doesn't lift her eyes when he steps into her tiny space.

"You gonna shave with that?" he asks. "I've got a new razor, you know."

"Dawn says I need to protect myself," she replies.

Dawn's not your brother, he wants to say, but can't. He sits beside her, pushing away broom handles and respirator tubules. "I've got a story for tonight," he says. "A new one."

"I don't like your stories."

His heart turns. "You're a bad liar, princeling."

"I *don't.* I'm too old for them." She swats him away, then goes back to sharpening her knife. "I'm signing a contract with BGS."

A shiver crawls up his spine. "No, you're not. Not now. I can't think of anything stupider."

"I have to do something," she says. "They killed Three."

"No, you don't." Again, he reaches for her, and again, she drives him back. "You're not ready to avenge anyone. You can't play the stoic warrior, Ty. You're too bratty."

"I'm not *playing* anything. This is real. They *killed* her."

"*Who* killed her, grub? Can you tell me who killed her?"

"Metaldrip."

"Which one of them?"

"I don't know—"

"No, you don't. And you're never going to meet him. So don't fucking— I miss her too, but don't throw yourself away. Don't do it. Promise me you won't."

She says nothing.

"Promise me." When she doesn't answer, he sighs. "Here. Brought you something."

"If it's a bodkin, I don't want it."

"I know. You were always more for the breeches role. Here." He pulls the guest's handkerchief from his pocket.

When she takes it, he can't tell if her look is of joy or devastation. "Why?"

"Gentlemen do it when they travel around the valley. You embroider a little memory from all the places you've been."

"We lost our needles."

"I'll get more. It's for when we go on the riverboat. Keep yourself busy."

She raises her eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

"For you, dummy."

Tyro grimaces, then drives her knife into the batiste.

"Hey—" Guy leans over. "That's an expensive—"

"You're a *liar,*" she growls. "You always say this."

"Say what?"

"We're going on the riverboat. *When,* Em? When are we going?" She shoves him. "Every time. Every time, you say something like this. We're going to the edge of the dead world. We're going to sail down the Catoptric. You promise me something good, just to keep me quiet for a few months. And then we always end up somewhere worse."

Anger tightens his throat. He wants to haul her over his shoulder and drag her down to the docks, throw her in the middle of a boarding line and let her find out for herself how expensive a ticket will be. Make her watch as a smuggler forces him to roll up his sleeves, counts his debts, and decides he is cargo not worth the risk.

"*Worse,* Ty?" he says. "I'll tell you where's worse. Orphanwell. Textile Crack. You wanna strike out on your own? You wanna go back to Strangleroot and beg for a contract?"

Tears gather in her eyes, and for an exquisite, guilty moment, he is glad. For all her boldness, she knows nothing—nothing about the sticky hell of Strangleroot, nothing of what he was hired to do there, nothing of what he is hired to do now. She will never know the prices he's paid, the loans, the second and third jobs, the betrayals and double deals that only left him with more violations, more deductions, more black bands, drowning him deep in the heart of the whirlpool at whose edge even the luckiest can barely tread.

When the first tears slip down her cheeks, he reaches for her, and this time, she doesn't push him away. "You wanna know the real truth?" he asks.

"Yes," she hiccups.

He hesitates, suspended in time, like a duelist before his final strike. Each word burns up his throat, and desperately, he wants her to burn a little, too. "We're never getting on that fucking riverboat."

★ ★ ★

"Now *this,*" Bertram says, "this is what it means to deconstruct with intention. To make the wreckage surpass the monument. This is *art*."

He wears teratopod armor like the rest of them, complete with a golden BGS respirator, but his mask can't hide his wide smile. He stands in the battle-torn ring of Nineteenth, taking in Dawn's work with a satisfied eye. The ruins of Metaldrip headquarters re-form in the morning light. As the fumes float away, it becomes clear that Reames's bioalchemical engineering is outdone only by Dawn's masterful use of it.

The walls of Metaldrip central command peel away, releasing petals of sparkling glass. Turrets bud like fungal stalks, watchtowers taper toward the sun. Though Dawn prefers to leave the abstractions of aesthetics to others, he must admit the sight stirs something in him. A grim sort of satisfaction, a bitter relief that after so many years of being forced to contort for the city's aesthetic desires, he can finally do the same to it.

No one on his side is hurt. Rickhardt and Bell return safely from their deployment of ecdytoxin, silent with awe and terror. Guy stays with the artillery, well out of the range of Metaldrip projectiles. After the initial shelling, Dawn himself leads the frontal assault, but there is little opposition left by the time the air clears. His men fumigate at will. The unmasked or unprotected succumb to the force of ecdytoxin, and those who manage to escape are as dead as those who don't.

"I'm thinking a prison, maybe," says Bertram as he approaches the blooming rubble. "Or a hospital. Depending on how the interior turns out. Oh, did you do this for me?"

Bertram stops at a makeshift gallows, fashioned from an arch of wreckage. A line of bureaucrats sway in its shadow, lips blue as their Ostlerfell cravats.

"No," Dawn says. "More for me."

Bertram stops to admire one bug-eyed specimen. The prolific effects of ecdytoxin are still at work on him; he sheds a soft, lovely scent, and a budding vine of blood crawls from his mouth. "There he is," Bertram breathes. "You recognize this one, Corporal?"

"Company president?"

"It's my uncle. One of them, anyway."

"Condolences, Bertram."

"Oh, stop. You were in Ostlerfell. You probably loathed him as much as I did. Colonel Mendel Gorslung?"

"Never met him. I was Third Autotomic. Assigned to the Exultant's son."

"Well, count yourself lucky. Even Autotomic was better off than his unit."

Dawn looks over the bloated face. He doesn't recall what role the man had played in the occupation, if he had overseen the march north, had ordered the Third Autotomic Brigade to seize Broken Horse Canyon, or simply had complimented the Laurel Chancellor's tie one day, planting the seed of his obsession with Ostlerfell Blue.

“Take a photograph of this one,” Bertram says. “It proves that the Palas is already involved, if they invited Uncle Mendel over.”

He continues down the line, pointing out the men he recognizes, most of whom he is more than happy to see hanged. Behind the dangling management, survivors creep across the courtyard, attempting to flee into the cracks. Some slip away seemingly unharmed, others peel open even as they run, moaning as skin and bone curl back to release new stamens of flesh.

“You ever see that old opera by Lascherhack?” Bertram asks. “*Birth of the Deathbed.*”

“No,” Dawn answers.

“Before the merchant-kings civilized the valley, the marauders used to make caps from the skulls of their opponents. They’d make cuff links out of teeth, fingers for boutonnieres. Pirate queens wore tiaras made of dried tongues. Oldest form of art there is. I think we should bring that back. And you’re spoiled for choice here, Corporal.”

Dawn looks down the line of bloated faces, and his stomach twists at the notion of wearing the flesh of any of them.

“Oh, you don’t have to choose one now,” Bertram smiles. “Still plenty of weeding to do.” He lays a gloved hand on Dawn’s shoulder, giving a firm squeeze. “So look alive, my friend. The tulip beds are next.”

SINS OF OUR PATRONS

Maximian lingers in the solarium, cloaked in Florian's perfume. The concoction sits differently on a wearer than it does on a witness; it is brutally constraining, intolerably cold, but it does nothing to cool the ache in his breast, that familiar blend of rage and guilt and helplessness.

The empty hollows of the new Rut Moon arc beyond the stained glass, skirting a sky of glittering satellites. Aster's herbs overgrow their pots, twisting around the brass filigree of her organ. Nearby, Florian lies in a golden casket, silk band over his eyes, while a pair of state perfumers, courtesy of the Chancellor, dress him for his funeral. Dr. Whyck has removed the shards of glass from his face, and sewn his lip and nose back into place. Dressed in finery and adorned in a pall of scents, he barely resembles himself. For the first time, he looks untroubled.

Outside the solarium stand the pallbearers, and outside the Palas, loitering in the courtyard, are a hundred marchers, two dozen horses, a brass band. Maximian knows what will start as a funeral will end as a celebration. A thousand cheers for the death of the little Impaler of the Tender Guard, gleeful congratulations whispered between ministers who found the boy nothing but distasteful. A crowd giddy to see what the Marshal will do next, now that his successor is dead.

He doesn't rise to lead the parade. Tonight, he is not confident he can stand the pageantry. He is not confident he can stand at all.

He shouldn't say he's surprised. He shouldn't say his heart quivered as his car approached that rotten nest of a bar, he should not admit that, when he knelt at Florian's side and laid his hand over his pierced throat, he had swallowed a cry. Patrons do not weep over their hirelings. But as he traced a glove across the boy's face, closing eyelids stippled with glass dust, he felt something die inside him.

He traced Florian's still-warm cheek, his jaw, the puncture in his throat. He ran his finger across the gash, bordered by the same black eschar as on the Chancellor's hand. A thread spiraled from the clotted blood, not silk from Florian's collar, nor his jacket. As Sorav pulled it loose, he saw a string falling from Aster's breast pocket, a handkerchief unraveling in her fist, the Chancellor's wretched lily pulling apart into curled red threads. A radius of lacework unraveled in his mind, from Florian to Demetrius to Bateusse, all leading back to a single knot of a man. A memory threatened to surface then, even through his defensive haze of mayfly, a memory of a small, frightened face in the hedges, an ache at the tip of his heart, right where a bullet had glanced off his rib. Vehemently, he refused it. He crushed the swaying thread in his glove, between his thumb and forefinger.

"It's a pity. You really did try with him, Max. It's always so sad to see a project cut short." A shadow falls across the casket, slim, suited, laurels creeping up a staghorn crown. The Chancellor's perfume cloaks him in a condolent warmth, but it can't hide the sneer in his voice. "'O, what flower I tend so dearly, blossoms to such noxious malodor.'"

With each word, the Chancellor's perfume shifts, darkens, compels Maximian to agree. Through sheer spite, he resists.

"Don't you dare quote Aufhocker to me," he growls.

"That's Montresor, old boy." His veneer of dignified sympathy turns sour as he rests his stiff arm on the edge of the casket. "And what a garden you've tended, my friend. All those years of letting that lad run amok, terrorizing my citizens—I really shouldn't have let him go on for so long. Harassing my fiancée like he did. Making those lewd advances. Seems position alone can't bestow class, can it?"

Sorav says nothing. He lifts his eyes to the Chancellor's wrist, imagining the eschar under his glove, black and putrid. The thought brings him less satisfaction than he expects.

"You know, that's your biggest mistake, Max. You treat your hirelings like family. They start to walk all over you. You have to keep it professional. Even my beloved knows the terms of her contract."

Sorav closes his eyes. *Did that stop her from breaking them?* he doesn't say. "This isn't about terms, Gorslung."

"Oh, please." The Chancellor unwraps a creeping vine from the nearest shelf. "Don't play at grief. You've left as many bereaved parents in your wake as you have orphans—this isn't new to you. So either crawl into the coffin with him or get on with the show. I have things to do. I have rehearsal."

Sorav holds his breath against the onslaught of Gorslung's perfume, but he feels it break through. His knees ache to rise, his eyes long to see the outer rings of the city, where Florian's casket will spill off a rushing cataract into the Catoptric far below.

"You," Sorav musters the willpower to whisper. "You did this."

"Did what? Killed your protégé? Blinded my wife?" A streak of rage burns through Gorslung's scent. "Did you *see* her, Max? Wandering around that hive, waving *your* gun around, terrified, confused, completely blind—you should go to the Sanitarium and see what those fucking Extemporists did to her. She's in no state to paint, much less perform. They tried to steal her talents and drove her fucking mad."

Sorav wants to laugh, he wants so badly to laugh in the Chancellor's face. He has seen the sketches the Tender Guard brought back from vant Passand's collection. He has seen the horrid explosion of her wedding dress, draped with loose, frayed twine.

"*You* did this," Gorslung continues. "You didn't clean out this mess, you let those insects proliferate right under your nose. You let your perfumer run around with one of them. And now I'm stuck with an unfinished Schölin commission, just like everyone else in this goddamn fucking town!" He slams his fist against a shelf, rattling the potted plants. "*Shit.* All I want is a portrait, is that too goddamn much to ask?" It takes a moment for his perfume to cool down. "Get up, Max. As soon as this little parade is over, start fumigating. Clear them out. Clear them all out. It's your *job.*"

Sorav, after an enormous effort, manages to stay seated.

"*God,*" the Chancellor continues. "You look like utter shit. You want me to call Whyck? See if she can manage to put you out of your misery? I wonder how much you can take before you die. Don't you wonder that sometimes?"

Sorav, exhausted, answers, "Yes."

"Well, don't fret, my friend. The toxin will do its work. It's only taking a while to decide how. Now. Stand." Bertram slaps his back in a puff of pestilence, and finally, Sorav obeys. "There, good. Say goodbye to your boy. And go get your perfumer. You need something to wear to my wedding. You're my best man, for God's sake."

★ ★ ★

Mallory creeps through the maze of the midcity, Aster trembling in his wake. The dayless glow of tenement windows follows them through the corridors, illuminating the stains on his gloves, the blood slithering down his forehead.

Aster sobs and wheezes and hiccups, but doesn't let herself hesitate, contemplate, mull over the consequences of her betrayal. She knows the Tender Guard is not far behind. Every shadow warps into nozzles and carbines; the soft footsteps in the corridors become the patter of pursuing Crypsis agents. She is sure that when Mallory rounds the next corner, there will be a spy there, dressed in the costume of a foreman; when he leads her down a winding staircase to a laundry unit, she is sure it will be into an ambush. When he ushers her into a tiny room, tells her to keep quiet, and locks her inside, she is sure he will never return.

The minutes stretch to hours. She fumbles through her purse, pushing her pill bottles aside and grasping for Mallory's handkerchief, or what remains of it. She hacks into it more for comfort than out of necessity. In the buzzing green lights, what's left of the embroidery takes on sinister shapes. Guylag's green banner unravels, the dragon's silver body glints like a sword.

She cries into the batiste for a while, then nods fitfully off. She doesn't know how long she sleeps, or hovers at the edge of sleep, racked by a vision of Florian falling, blood gurgling from his throat. She jolts awake when a bell rings somewhere above her, followed by a distant, muffled roar of water.

When the door finally opens, Aster draws her knees up, squinting in the dim light. A man familiar to her, if only from posters and flyers and newspaper print, enters the room, a bandaged Mallory in tow. Sleek and dark, jacket trimmed in mink, he looks less like the triumphant Thomas the Younger than someone hired to polish his shoes.

"—fucking misstep," he's saying. "Ah, well. Improvisation is key. At least we've got one disinherited avenger off our future plate." He offers Aster his hand. "Vralen Vost. A pleasure. Mallory speaks fondly of you."

"Eir Prophet," she says quietly. She takes his glove and allows him to pull her to her feet.

"Apologies. We didn't intend to kidnap you so abruptly. But you know. Things veer off-script."

"We?" Aster glances to Mallory.

"Well, him, mostly," Demetrius says. "The others are more than happy to purge the Revivalist ranks. Mal here likes to maintain that you can always cast off the sins of your patrons. He's got some sort of Classicist taint I can't seem to get rid of. I take it he's told you just about nothing?"

Aster hugs herself. "A few half-truths, I think."

"Of course. That's his problem. He *equivocates*—it's so annoying. He never really learned how to lie properly, is the issue."

"Dee," Mallory says darkly.

"Right, right. Come on, darling. Best get you cleaned up. You two have some talking to do." He leads her into a wooden passageway. "God, it does make espionage such a chore with him—but there you go. Without his contamination, I'd have no hope of overthrowing the Chancellor, you see."

A chill crawls up Aster's spine, and her stomach rises with it, fluttering at Demetrius's handsome, ambitious smile. She tries to suppress the feeling of weightlessness, the same terrified tingle she gets when Elspeth, shrieking with laughter, speeds her car blindly over a hillock. "Don't…" she says. "Don't hurt Elspeth."

"*Hurt* her? I worship her. If ever there was a progenitor of Extemporism, it's Elspeth Schölin. Well, besides Merrett, maybe. But she was too far ahead of her time to be credited with anything." The corridor opens into a wide cavern, lamplight pouring in from its twisted offshoots. A few figures amble by, nodding at Demetrius as they pass.

"Is she … is she all right?" Aster asks.

"She always is," Demetrius answers. "You know her better than I do. You know that woman could talk a fire out of burning her."

"Where is she?"

"As far as we can tell…" Demetrius stops to receive a message from one of the passersby, which he folds into his pocket without reading. "They're taking her to the Sanitarium. Gorslung will keep her close. He can't have anything throw off his wedding plans."

"He does love his plans," Aster mutters.

"And that'll be what kills him." Demetrius ducks down a narrow corridor. Moonlight spills up from the planks under his feet. "Vralen Vost, El would really want you at the ceremony. We all would. A guest like you could really shake things up."

Aster can't name the emotion that tightens her throat. Anger, anxiety, eagerness, spite. "What exactly were you plotting?"

"Well, I plot nothing *exactly.* I'm more of an improviser." He laughs. "Oh, lose the *look,* vralen. If I had any carefully laid plans, I'd be in a panic right now. In this town you have to prepare for nothing and expect everything." He slows, turns, and offers her a radiant smile. "Vralen Vost, I'm about to turn this stump onto its side. Once I dissolve the Ministry of Aesthetics—"

"Dee," Mallory says, resting a hand on Aster's shoulder. "Let her breathe a moment."

"Of course, of course. Think on it, vralen. We could use you. This is the last gasp of Revivalism. Not many get to say they're present at the death of an age." A pair of women pass by, sabers over their shoulders. One leans up to whisper in his ear, and he nods. "All right, then. I've a few things to do in the meantime. A few performances to get out of the way. Like they say, the only thing more important than swordsmanship is showmanship." He kisses Mallory on the cheek, and Aster on the bare hand. As he disappears down the corridor, another bell echoes from above. This time, the roar that comes after sounds more like a crowd than a floodgate.

"Extemporists," Mallory mutters. "Pleasure to watch, terror to work with. Insist on making everything up as they go."

Aster watches Demetrius's glow fade, wheezing softly. "You have a lot of explaining to do, Mal."

"You sound strained. Let's get you some fresh air." He gestures with the little bag he carries over his uninjured shoulder. "I'll show you something."

He leads her down a stairwell. The pink haze of reflected sunrise seeps up from below, and they emerge into the undercity. Catwalks creak under their feet, deformed with the fractal motifs of ecdytoxin. The twisted roots swarm with life. Rats and insects and criminals climb through the catwalks, and though Aster flinches as they pass, they barely glance at her, unconcerned with two overdressed and bloody exiles.

She clings to Mallory as they cross a splintered plank. Hundreds of feet below, the ships pass by. "Where are you taking me?" she asks.

"Just an old haunt of mine. You'll like it."

He leads her through a net of vines, into a little tunnel, down a rickety spiral of fungal growths she assumes might have once been stairs. He saunters across the gangways with uncanny familiarity, as if he has come this exact way hundreds of times before.

He pulls her over one last knot and onto what remains of a mesh platform. A cluster of deformed pitcher plants dangles nearby, gurgling clear, steamy water.

"No better baths in town," he says. "Climb in."

He struggles to shimmy out of his jacket, so Aster helps him. She eases the sleeve over his bandaged arm and folds it across the nearest branch. "You owe me a story, Mallory."

"I know."

"And a *whole* story. A true one. None of this shit about Dagdrun and military college."

"All that is true. Everything I've told you is true. Flour sack and all." He turns, letting her pull open his belt. "I'm familiar with *Don Javunech.* I know what happens when you seduce women with lies."

Despite herself, Aster laughs. As she helps him undress, she takes him in, all of his scars, his flaws, his single dark tattoo. As he sinks into the water, she takes off her gloves. "He's a passionate man, that Demetrius," she says.

"He's the best of Tiliard's many bad men." Mallory shrugs. "He's a visionary. He just can't quite make out what that vision is."

She sheds her dress, then her underclothes. “Do you … do you really think he’ll make a good Chancellor?”

“That hardly matters. The position isn’t made for good people.” He leans back, staring at the rustling leaves above him. “It doesn’t matter what he does. He could burn this city to the ground and only one thing will grow from the ashes. ‘Change is the boldest face of constancy.’ Do you remember who said that?”

“No.”

“Neither do I. It may have been Aufhocker. When he was young.” His voice wavers. “What happens to this place means nothing to me. What Dee does with Tiliard when this is over—what El does, what you do—I don’t care. I’ll never care. I’m not in all this to change this place.”

“What are you in it for, then?”

“I’m in it to get out.”

She hesitates at the lip of the tub, watching his face briefly disappear in the steam. “Who are you?” she whispers. “Really?”

“Mallory vant Passand,” he replies. “My mother was a seamstress who found me in an oil drum. My father was a bishop of the Last Monday. My brother is Olaf Aufhocker.” He glances at her. “Come on in. Water’s fine.”

She sinks into the caustic steam, submerging her ankles, her bruised knees, her aching back, her sore heart—everything unwinds, suspended over the void of the Catoptric. When she glances at Mallory, slender and naked, she can’t help but swim over to embrace him.

“Well,” she mutters. “Get telling.”

He stares into the woody underside of the piping. If not for the mist, she might dare to say she sees tears in his eyes. “Where should I start?”

She runs a hand through his hair. “Same as every good story. With a dead man.”

“Fucking Aufhocker.” He smiles. “No. Not this one. Not a dead man. Just a dreaming one, who sings in his sleep.”

DEEP CANYON

Empress Larbella wavers between two lovers: Fernand, the hard-done-by porter, and General Bianco, the lovestruck tyrant. In Montresor's novelization of the classic tale, she chooses Fernand, in Drovick's opera, Bianco—but tonight, in the privacy of the bishop's bedroom, she chooses both.

The gentlemen, with two tongues and four hands between them, make thorough and repeated work of her. Afterward, while they turn to each other, she sits at the edge of the bed and opens the *Rhizosphere* over her lap, engrossed in the story of an itinerant poet who had recently been caught up in a BGS fumigation job. He was captured drawing stanzas on the walls with the blood of his own injuries, prolific as the carnage around him.

"It's the best poetry Tiliard has seen in a century," she says, adjusting her headdress. "Living verse—it gets more complex every time you read it."

"Lovely," Bianco grunts in Fernand's hand. "Yes, good."

"We should get our own poet, darling. Sybil has one and says it's prime to have a recitation during supper."

"*Yes.*" Bianco's eyes roll; he groans, then regains his sense. "What? No, dear. We can't afford one. Not with your cardiopractor—"

"Cardiomancer, darling."

"With the repairs to the plumbing, and the villa—you don't even *like* poetry."

"*This* poetry is good. Well, we can't have this one. I think he's bled out. But we should get someone. There will be more. This whole thing shows no signs of stopping."

"Darling, you don't *like* this new stuff, do you? It's all so very … loud."

Fernand swings his legs over the side of the bed and sheds his bellhop's uniform.

"Would you be our poet?" Larbella caresses his arm. "You must see a lot of this, being at the forefront. It must be inspiring."

He laughs bitterly. "You're welcome to come with me on my next job."

"Oh, no, *really.* I'd be useless." She kisses Guy's bare shoulder, on a ring of his debts. "Stay, dear Fernand. Sing for us. Stay the night."

He hesitates. There's nothing he wants more than to lie between them on their silk sheets, to nurse another glass of wine and listen to their meandering insights on religion and philosophy and art.

"Can't," he says. "Work in the morning."

"Let me walk you down, then," says the bishop. He stands and retrieves a roll of banknotes from the vanity. He tucks the bills into the pocket of his general's pelisse before leading Guy down the hall. "Are you all right, my son?"

"I'm fine."

"You haven't come to confession."

Guy's throat aches. He almost pours everything at the bishop's feet, from work to Tyro to the explosive music pounding through his head, but he still hurts from the last time he let the truth slip. He can still hear Tyro sobbing in his ear. "I'm fine, Eir Bishop. Not enough sleep."

"Who can blame you, with this nasty spat going on." The bishop sighs and presses the bills into Guy's hand. "Here. For your years of service."

The stack of banknotes is thicker than expected. Carefully, Guy counts them. "Eir—this is—"

"A bit of a severance package. Apologies." The bishop takes his shoulders. "I know you rely on the extra cash each month. But it's just with all this going on, and considering the nature of your other patron … the Gorslungs are no friends of mine, and it's not safe for you to sleep with the enemy on your days off."

"Davide—I—"

"We'll be staying in the villa until this whole thing blows over. I've got a suite on the *Bastion Rose* reserved on the full moon. Don't worry. We'll be back." He smiles, brushing Guy's cheek. "This will all be over soon. Believe me. I'm old enough to remember the last coup. Hell, even the one before. I was just a boy, then. Volunteered for the Anti-Reactionaries, if you can believe it. I wasn't a good enough orator for the actual Reactionaries." He squeezes Guy's shoulder. "Stay strong, lad. The moonlight always comes around again. Maybe we'll pick things up when this all cools off, hm?"

"Yes, Eir Bishop," Guy says, though he can recognize finality when he hears it.

"Good night, then. Stay safe."

"Good night."

He pockets his payment and steps onto the porch. The door closes, and behind its amber glass the bishop's shadow lingers, paces, then dissolves. Years of Guy's diligence, practice, discretion, his expertise in myriad and unique perversions, blink out with the girandoles.

He takes the long way back to the Birdcall Hotel, mostly to take a few minutes to cry. He tells himself it's only because he's lost his best client, safe and dependable and rich—the kind of patron he could only dream of when he first realized that he could be paid for what others freely gave and desperately sought. But he can't help feeling as if he's been backhanded, betrayed—the same as when he'd finished his training at Borisch & Sons, when he received his first paycheck only to discover that it was a bill.

"You didn't think they'd teach you a marketable skill for free, did you?" Three had laughed. "Borisch & Sons can't have you running off to sell yourself to their rivals."

"You could've told me," he whispers to the ash-speckled night, to the pebbles of the moon, to Three, omniscient in the dust of annihilation. "You could've warned me back then."

"What good would that have done?" she replies. "You still would've signed on."

As usual, he can't argue with her, the hard bitch. God, how he misses her. How lost he is without her, with her gold tooth and gray streaks, more his mother than his mother.

He pauses where the street intersects Eighteenth. A few blocks over, the glow of an ecdytoxic reaction spirals over the rooftops. A ruff of gunfire rings out, then the billowing, colorful beat of canisters detonating.

Guy changes direction, wondering what she would've made of it all, having survived one turn of the political seasons before. She could tell him if this feeling is normal, this pressure, from the outside and in, as if he has trapped himself between a growing beast and its breaking shell. She would know something about when to hang on to its back, and when, like a doomed rat, to jump ship.

As if he could. He is embedded too deep into the flesh of this thing to crawl out now.

"But, you know, Moulène," Three reminds him. "Tyro might not be."

Guy stops in the street. He clutches the bills in his pocket, and a seam rips inside him. He recoils at the distant possibility, the image of shoving her aboard some boat and watching it sail south without him. His stomach turns trying to digest the thought of abandoning her.

It's feasible. She has no marks. She won't have to roll up her sleeves to show that her debts are not worth more than her passage. He fingers the banknotes in his pocket—not enough, not nearly enough. He's a few thousand marks short of a ticket, and a few thousand more short of a safe smuggler, but maybe, by some miracle—

The sound of a horn hits him before the actual taxicab. The brakes scream, and so does he, leaping aside as the bumper rams into his calf. Pain shocks up to his knee, and he falls back onto the curb, banknotes scattering to the wind. The taxi rocks, and the window rolls down to unleash a volley of obscenities.

Guy responds in kind, grasping at his money, but as the cab pulls away, rumbling toward a glow the driver can't see, he hollers after them. "Don't go that way—don't *fucking*—"

The taxi only honks, coughing down the street, and Guy limps back to the sidewalk, grip tightened over his banknotes.

★ ★ ★

"Listen here, boy," Reames says, because he has already forgotten the child's name. "Here's the first rule of Catoptric bioalchemy: Rules change. Even—especially—the first one."

To his delight, the kid is more fascinated than bewildered. His newest apprentice, whom he calls a boy and who doesn't correct him, listens well and speaks little.

"Second rule: Expect nothing," Reames says. "And prepare for everything. Ecdytoxin is fundamentally unstable. It's a promiscuous enzyme—without alchemical guidance it'll make a molt of anything, do you understand?"

"No," the boy answers.

"Good," Reames says. "Then you might survive this. Wear your buffer. Armor can only protect you so much." He places a helmet over the kid's head and sprays him with an aerosol of snake milk and cinnabar. "And don't panic. They love that."

The boy nods. He doesn't flinch when Reames guides him toward the tanks. They are vast, dark, and reinforced with slabs of steel; inside lie six teratopods, the only six left in the city, big as prize hogs and rolling in a slop of Dagdrun wine and scraps of vant Wron sketches. Fine food for finer beasts.

"Ecdytoxin is made in the glands of the proboscis," he tells the child. He climbs the ladder to the top of the tanks and hauls the boy up after him. "So be gentle when you extract it. Don't startle them."

He pulls open the first hatch, then the one beneath. A sweet smell rises from the tank. The kid stands beside him, pale and wide-eyed behind the glass of his respirator.

"What happens if I startle them?" he asks.

"Whatever they feel like." Reames ushers the boy toward the hatch. "They may sting you, eat you, break your neck and play with your corpse like a puppet." He unrolls the rope ladder. "I sedated them. Go for the smallest one. That one's about to molt. I have a feeling it's going to become the next brood-parent."

The boy climbs down the ladder, glancing back up only once before dropping to the darkened floor of the tank. His buffer resonates in the thin shaft of light, glowing a soft blue. Around him, the darkness slithers. The teratopods click on musical feet, slowly circling their fancies, tamed by a haze of soporific fumes.

The boy is hesitant, as they all are. But unlike the others, who scramble back up as soon as they hit the bottom, begging until Reames clicks his tongue and shuts the hatch, he remains calm. As he crawls through the nests of paper and glass and shredded canvas, he slows to admire the creatures. He is different, Reames thinks, from the dangling monkeys from Orphanwell, different from the bucktoothed little prodigies at the University, who play at eagerness until it comes to real bioalchemy. This one, he can tell, recognizes beauty. This one understands that he is witnessing what others will only ever see in hindsight: the slow, dark birth of a new Tiliard.

Reames decides he likes this lad. If he lives through this first trial, he'll be worth a contract.

"Mind the spiracles," he says. The boy kneels in a corner, bending over one of the creatures. "The pure stuff is under the proboscis. At the base. Don't let it touch your skin."

The child pries open the radial mandibles, circled like numbers on a clockface around the teratopod's mouth.

"Good," Reames whispers to the dark. "Use the collection vial. The glands by the stinger. That's what we need." The boy inserts his hands between the barbs of the creature's folded tongue. "Use your thumb. And don't gather too much. Then it won't have enough to molt."

The kid fidgets, stills, then turns to the light. If he is stung, he doesn't flinch, he doesn't cry out. Slowly, he makes his way back to the ladder.

"Let me see," Reames says.

The boy holds up a thimble's worth of silver fluid. Just enough for a few canisters.

"Not bad for a first pass. Come on up, let's have a look at it."

The kid crawls up the ladder, hands shaking. Reames takes the vial and raises it to the light, looking for contaminants, for emulsion, for any sign it may backfire after processing. Even this small amount, this little droplet, more gray than silver, moves him nearly to tears. He can almost feel a monologue coming on.

"Hey, boy," he says. "Do you know the third rule of Catoptric bioalchemy?"

★ ★ ★

Before the fumes dissipate from the ruins of Metaldrip Defense Industries, its allies begin to fall. In a single night raid, Clearwater Pest Solutions is brought to its knees. Placid Sewage Treatment Company preemptively surrenders, and an envoy from Wherewithal, Inc., collapses on the steps to the Judicial Palas with a plea for aid.

The Marshal Exultant responds. He gathers his associates in Sanitation and the Cabinet, including the fraction of Gorslungs still loyal to Mendel's memory, and makes his move.

His counterattacks are vicious, brutally efficient, and often successful—mostly owing to, historians will later say, early Revivalism's dependence on a volatile and experimental new mode. But even his soundest victories are undermined by the insidious advance of ecdytoxic refinement. Neo-Repressionist propaganda is uninspired, its strategies poorly choreographed, and the buildings leveled in the wake of the skirmishes regrow in quintessential Revivalist style, as awe-inspiring in their novelty as they are profound in their deformity.

Tiliard, both repelled and riveted by the ascension of the ragtag exterminators hell-bent on re-forming the city, buzzes around the greatest underdog story since *Little Orphan Clevette.* Awed witnesses recount tales of the creatures fleeing the onslaught of BGS fumigants. The *Manual* burgeons with new entries: *401: The Common Defector. 402: The Crypsis Informant. 403: The Toxic Nightbeetle. 404: Collateral Damage.*

A revived Corporal Flint appears onstage and on the page, played by a handsome baritone intent on extracting justice from the Marshal Exultant, who violated their contract and conspired to have him killed for it. One journalist becomes famous for her photographs of him; the same woman who had first captured him descending the plank of the hospital ship now captures him toting his carbine, directing rebuilding efforts on the canals, embracing a lieutenant who will be identified, many years later and through the tireless efforts of complete obsessives, as Olaf Aufhocker.

Weeks stretch like months. Guy follows Dawn across Tiliard, camping in ruins and marching under the toxic sky with the

Manual under his arm. He no longer vomits after every skirmish, but then again, he rarely eats. He no longer dreams, but he rarely sleeps. Every night, when BGS sets up camp in a looted gallery or burnt-out hellrat nest, he finds a quiet place, steadies his shaking hands, and writes. He writes in the margins of his *Manual,* he writes on the hotel notepad, he writes all the stories that he can't tell Tyro on these lonely days of siege. Stories she can take with her when, the moment he scrapes up enough cash, he betrays her, throwing her on a riverboat and shipping her off to Dagdrun with nothing but a handkerchief and vague instructions to seek out a stranger's villa.

Every word pains and satisfies him, like pushing a loose tooth. He pours his nightmares, his guilt, his fear, into the stories. He hums the tones Dawn's nozzle makes as he sweeps ecdytoxin down the streets, he taps his foot to the repeating fire, melodies built from the terrifying cadences of bursting phlogiston grenades. He invents a role for Tyro in each one. All her favorites—the stoic mercenary, the kid revolutionary, the sinful priest, the embittered gentleman with a lily boutonniere. Each is a little gift, a little piece of him that will stay with her when the worst should happen to him. Maybe, down the line, when she finally learns to read, she will appreciate them. If not, she might be able to sell a few to a theater in the countryside.

The night after the Row for Splinter Row, Dawn's masterwork of battle that will start to turn the tide in the Revival's favor, they set up camp in a deposed slumlord's ruined manor. Dawn, glowing with victory, is paraded before the press while his men occupy their latest stronghold. Ancillary staff take over the kitchens while the extermination workforce piles up the bodies in the courtyard, allies and enemies, the dead and those changed enough to count as such.

As Rickhardt sets his torch to the flailing mound, Guy has to turn away. He retreats through the shattered archways and up the stairs, to the quiet interior of the manor. He moves from room to room for a while, checking closets and opening the splintered remains of drawers for anything the BGS appraisers may have missed. As with all seized properties, they have been thorough in their sweep. Everything of value or beauty has been counted, categorized, sent for safekeeping or down to the teratopod tanks as fodder for their next skirmish. The only treasure he finds is a typewriter in an office on the highest floor, and even then, its ivory keys are warped and browned, unable to be pried loose.

Beyond the arched window by the desk, a column of smoke rises, carrying a peal of moans. A cheer follows, striking a dissonant chord in Guy's head. He leans against the glass, watching the burning pile contort and solidify, iridescent flakes of ash peeling away to reveal a blooming bouquet of marble bones. He swallows his awe, and the sickness stirred by it, and sits at the typewriter.

Ignoring the shouts of revelry and the howls of the injured, he feeds paper into it and tests out the malformed keys. He flinches at the clack of metal, then tries another. The feel is strange, but each letter is functional, a brief, resistant weight before a swift snap. He finds an odd sort of relief in each stroke, and before he knows it, a sentence sighs out of him. In the dusty bower of exfoliating gold leaf and bloated leather chaises, one finger at a time, he begins clicking away at the first lines of what will become *Fleeting Lodestar.*

"Guylag."

He starts. Dawn enters in a tide of distorted light, scrubbed clean and resplendent in his formal uniform. He closes what's left of the door, lifting his rifle strap over the silver trim of his epaulet. He's wearing a new pin, and pomade in his hair.

"You look nice," Guy says.

"Bertram dragged me in front of the cameras again. Made a whole ceremony of it. Impossible to get away."

"Did they give you another ribbon?"

"Worse, a promotion." He pulls off his gloves and lays them on his rifle. "Why weren't you there?"

"Sorry. I didn't…"

"I looked for you. I wanted to— What are you even doing up here?"

"I'm … writing things."

"What things?"

"The things I—" He pauses as Dawn approaches. "I can hear. In my head. They're so loud. It—almost hurts, until I get it out."

Dawn hovers over him, leaning on the back of his chair. Then, he takes Guy's cheeks in his hands. "What are you—" Guy tries to laugh. "Hey—"

Dawn only moves his head, one hand tilting his jaw, the other brushing his earlobe. Guy shivers, tries to pull away, but Dawn is firm, running his bare thumb over the cartilage of his helix. As he draws it along the scar, a muffled chord comes to life.

"It's reshaping you," Dawn breathes. "Like it is me. Like the rest of Tiliard."

The light in his eyes is silver as the Catoptric. It's an odd spark, a glint of certainty, of rightness—one that had died for a long time after Ostlerfell.

"Are you okay?" Guy asks.

"I want," Dawn starts, quietly, "to know your name."

"I—" He swallows. "I'm still in debt."

"You're paying it back right now, Guylag." Dawn smiles; his eyes flit to the glowing window. "BGS will forgive it all. You'll be free. Soon—when all this is over."

"When this is…" Guy doesn't finish—he can't quite imagine the world of *over,* a world in which this reaping will not be followed by a sowing, in which Tiliard will not just grow from itself again. A changed but familiar garden, as Montresor says.

Dawn's grip tightens on his shoulder. "Tell me."

The man can't be drunk. There's nothing on his breath, no scent of smoke, no hint of mad honey, only a glint of inspiration. Guy tenses in his chair; he wants to laugh, to ask why now, why so suddenly—but he knows better. Dawn has been waiting for years, eternally deferring, letting each opportunity slip past, never seizing them but only brushing them as they go by, a caress here, a soft word there. Now, aglow with triumph, with the entire city reshaping to his will, there is no reason he should not claim any of the many things he has been owed for so long.

Not for the first time, Guy is acutely aware of the difference in strength between them. He is aware of the rifle at the door, of Dawn's victorious panoply, the glint of justice in his eye, of light and life, the same he wears when he drives his blade through flesh, when he watches ligatures tighten over his enemies' necks. Suddenly, Guy is less terrified that his friend could overpower him than he is of the possibility he might be willing to.

He says nothing. He hooks a finger in Dawn's pressed collar, then guides his face downward. Their lips meet, and they freeze, mouth on closed mouth, neither daring to move for a few agonizing seconds.

"You're avoiding the question," Dawn says, but he doesn't pursue it further. He pulls Guy's chair, suspending it on its back legs. An arm wraps around his waist, another his knees, and he is lifted from the seat, deposited instead on a cushion of overgrown leather. Dawn follows, hands deft, mouth open. His touch is persistent, firm, and when he traces Guy's scar with his lips, the toxin between them resonates. Guy lies back, helplessly permeable, shivering as the noxious particulates enter him from mouth and lungs and ear and skin. Everywhere Dawn touches him, he feels unmade, a goo inside a chrysalis, a mindless thing subject to the mindless processes of life.

He closes his eyes, music shuddering inside him. Behind his eyelids, a curtain rises over the Gentleman of the Void, sailing into the dead, wilted world, a wilderness without tulips, nothing blooming or swelling or bursting open, nothing pollinating or copulating or permutating, nothing but stillness, where only nothing is possible. A different kind of paradise.

"Guy."

He opens his eyes. Dawn hovers above him, stern frown on his face.

"What is it, Guy? What am I doing wrong?"

"It's all right," Guy says. "Go ahead. Do what you want."

"Look at me." Dawn's hand redirects his gaze. "Are you even here?"

"It's okay."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"I'll do whatever you want. It's all right."

"No, it's not." Dawn sits back. "It's not."

Guy pushes onto his elbows. "I told you—"

"You think you're being kind? Humoring me? Not making a rapist of me?" Dawn slips off the cushions. "How much?"

"What?"

"How much do I have to pay you?" Shadows deepen his brow. "So you get something out of this. Anything at all."

"Dawn—"

"A hundred? Two? How much do you usually charge?"

"Stop."

"So you can feel like I've done something for you. That's all I want."

"I don't—"

"You want a box at the Opera?" Dawn starts to pace, gliding from the window to the writing desk and back. "I'll give it to you. I'll give you the whole goddamn fucking theater."

"I don't want anything," Guy says.

"Don't lie to me. You can lie to anyone but me. I know you too well." Dawn clenches his jaw. "What's your price?"

Words snuff out in Guy's mouth. There are a dozen easy answers—he's got a price for a burglary, for a door-to-door salesman, for a captured spy, for Fernand and an Ascetic monk and a naïve country gentleman. But his flat rate—well—he hasn't thought of that. He can't help but laugh a little.

Dawn glares at him. "Forget it."

"Wait," Guy mutters, but Dawn is already buttoning his tunic and making for the door. He hesitates by the knob, chewing on something.

"I could smell him, you know," he says.

"What?"

"Every new moon, every time you came back down from the overcity. Both of us could smell him. His cologne. His sweat. His wife's cooking. You'd reek of him. You'd come home in the middle of the night and crawl into bed next to your kid sister. It wasn't right."

Guy blinks at the darkness in his voice.

"Did you ever tell her?" Dawn asks. "Tell her where you got the money for her dresses?"

"Don't—don't start this."

"You spent years shoving her between us. Using a child as a shield against me. And then you'd come home reeking of some stranger. She could tell. She wasn't stupid."

"How is that worse?" Guy says. "How is that worse than smelling of pesticide? Of sewage?" He gestures to the window and the statuary burning to life outside. "Of *that*?"

"*That,* at least, has a little dignity to it. That is so I don't have to see you sucking some pervert off in the confession booth—for *years,* Guylag, you were on your knees for him—and where'd that get you? Now look where I got you." He steps forward, and Guy shrinks into the cushions. "You have no idea what I've done for you. What I've signed. This—all this—is only the beginning."

"I don't want…"

"You deserve more—more than sitting at the feet of your betters and begging for them to toss you their scraps. That won't work, it's never worked. You'll never get what they have by groveling for it."

"I don't … I don't want what they have—"

"Oh, sure. You want the *countryside* instead, don't you? You want an escape from all this." A mirthless smile crosses his face. "I escaped once. Made it all the way to Ostlerfell. You have no fucking idea. It's only worse out there. I killed for them. I died for those bastards—I died so they could have *blue.*" He pauses, glancing at the script burgeoning from the typewriter. "You know it, Guy. There's no way out. Even if you make it all the way to plum country, you'll just be spraying aphids in their fields rather than cockroaches in their basements. There's no way out but up."

Guy curls on the cushions, inert. For a moment he fears that Dawn will pull the paper from the typewriter and destroy it, but he only rests a clenched fist against the desk.

"I won't lose you, Guy," he says. "You're the only family I have." He straightens, expressionless. "I'm remaking this place for us. You, and me, and Tyro. Don't you dare fucking look away while I do it."

THE RIPEST FRUIT ON THE VINE

The courtyard of the Sanitarium is vast, elegant, paved with arabesques of marble—it is one of Sorav's earliest, crudest works, but he still finds a little beauty in it. The yard is peaceful, so different from the height of the Revival, when it swarmed with the sick and changed. Bertram was always buzzing among them, swinging his laurels around his finger, pointing out which survivors could shape art from monstrosity: which many-handed thing would grow into a stunning pianist, whose blossoming vocal folds would make a good gift for the impresario.

As the Marshal traverses the rose gardens, he spies a familiar trellis: an arc of silver from which the management of Metaldrip Defense Industries once dangled. A canopy of trumpet vine grows there now, and under it Elspeth sits with her easel, flanked by nurses and chaperones and other patients (or Crypsis disguised as patients).

As the Marshal approaches, she keeps her gaze on the scene before her. The panoply of beauty is offensive in its extravagance. A hundred bouquets frame the scene around the courtyard fountain. A gorgeous girl plays a harp on its lip, singing to a gorgeous boy at her feet, who in turn pets a gorgeous dog at his own. The music is superb, and the light eases through the fountain's mist onto golden strings and golden skin. From his angle, Sorav can see Elspeth's canvas is barely touched, and only by a dollop of yellow.

"Eir Marshal," she says without lifting her eyes. "Please tell me you brought your thumbscrews. I could use a break."

"I'm not here to torture you, vralen."

"I suppose not. My fiancé wouldn't allow it." She doesn't glance at him, but he can see her eyes are sunken and dry, clearly post-treatment. He can't guess as to what the Surgeon General has done to her. "They finally let me out of the dark," she says. "And *this* is what they show me. This pastoralist dogshit."

The harper's fingers fall still. The dog lifts a leg against the fountain.

"Give us some peace," the Marshal tells them. The nurses disappear, the models don their robes and retreat to a nearby gazebo to share a cigarette. Crypsis agents back up a few paces, pretending to cough or lapse into ecdytoxic delirium. "It's quiet out here," he continues. "Emptier than it used to be."

"Well, you're not mutilating as many civilians as you used to," Elspeth answers.

He is struck by the thought of wrapping a glove around her neck, soft and easy, squeezing the air from her even before Crypsis can stop him. A thought that proves he needs to reapply his mayfly perfume. "May I sit?" he asks. When he lowers himself onto the bench beside her, she doesn't turn. "How is your sight, vralen?"

"The Surgeon General says it'll recover."

"That's good news."

"I don't believe that quack. Did you know she specializes in the care of domestic insects?"

"I did. She was my doctor once, too. When I was younger."

"She says I'll be able to finish his portrait. If not by the wedding night, then within the year. I just need to retrain my facets. My *ommatidia.* Start with the basics, work my way up. Just enough so I can stumble across a stage." She shakes her head. "God. What a farce. Bert can't just have a wedding, it has to be an opera. It's that kind of maximalist bullshit that gets people so sick of Revivalism." She flicks her brush onto the ground. "I'm sorry about Florian, by the way."

"Thank you, vralen." In his mind, he tightens his grip over her trachea. "Kind of you to say."

Finally, she turns from the canvas, dark, sunken eyes flitting up his uniform. "Oh, Marshal," she says. "I can *see* you. Part of you. Just that streak—I've never seen you burn so cold." A flash of silver crosses her pupils, like an animal's in the night. "They haven't invented a pigment for that one yet."

"Elspeth. Where is vant Passand?"

"Oh, I can't say, Eir Marshal."

"Where is he?" Sorav repeats, every thread in his being pulled to snapping. "Where did he take Aster?"

"You think I saw where he dragged her off to? I can barely see *this*"—she gestures at the fountain—"much less what happened in that dreadful little bar. Especially not with your Guard tearing the place apart, waving truncheons and spraying nozzles. Poor Aster, her poor lungs—"

"Answer the question, vralen."

"All we wanted was a drink—a nip before rehearsal, then your Guard—"

"Don't be coy, Elspeth. He murdered Florian. And he left traces behind. I think you're familiar with them."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We found your wedding dress at his house. In fact, we found a lot of things at his house."

"I'm allowed to have acquaintances, aren't I? Vant Passand offered to help me with my eyesight. Give me a little beauty to practice on. I barely know the man—"

"I am speaking to you first, vralen, for Aster's sake. I know you care for her, or you pretend to."

"Marshal—"

"She adores you. She always has. If you had any ounce of love for her, any *pity,* even, you'd tell me where she went. If I can't find her, I can't keep her safe."

"Marshal, if I knew, I'd tell you. Believe me."

"I don't." He pauses to look over her canvas once again. "You're strong, vralen. And clever. And talented. These are the virtues Aster loves in you. But good sense is also a virtue."

"Well, I'm afraid it's not one of mine. The Sanitarium didn't instill any virtues in me it couldn't exploit."

He sighs. "That's all right, vralen. You're only the first on my list. There are others in vant Passand's circle. Demetrius Prophet, foremost." Elspeth shrugs, but can't hide the blood draining from her face. "You know, your husband will be upset if you force me to break Prophet's knees. And people tend to die when he's upset."

"*Tend* to die?" she says. "Who tends to kill them, Marshal?"

This time, Maximian does reach out. It's all he can do to redirect his hand from her windpipe to her nape. "Listen, vralen. I'm going to smoke him out one way or another. You get to decide how much of this city burns while I do it."

She only offers a false, frightened little smile. "Please, Marshal. You're an exterminator. Why would I prove myself a rat?"

"Suit yourself, vralen." He stands. "But one last word of advice."

"Yes, Eir Marshal?"

"Give up. You've played your hand. Now play your part. Bertram will treat you well. He really, truly loves your art."

Elspeth looks back over her canvas, at the tiny smear of her new painting. "You know," she says quietly. "You don't have to play the hound. You'd make a good betrayer. Drop your little Bianco act and go for the Caspian."

"I'm afraid I'm bound by contract." He hesitates. "And I don't know who Caspian is."

"Really? You've never seen *Sins of Our Patrons*?"

"No."

"It's Aufhocker's best. You really should see it."

"Maybe. When this is all over." As he turns to eye her, he can't tell if the burning in his chest is contempt, or pity. "I wish you a speedy recovery, Elspeth. I'll see you at rehearsal."

★ ★ ★

"There's an old line," Mallory says, leaning over the edge of the pitcher plant. "From some Vrenecker platitude, I think. My brother sang it sometimes. 'Is it worse to bite the hand that feeds you, or kiss the hand that beats you?'" He stretches in the steam and reaches for his bag. "I had always thought that it was a choice. That my brother fell toward the latter, and me, I was the former. Through and through. An ungrateful, moody little biter. Will you hold my mirror while I shave?"

"Sure," Aster replies.

He opens his kit on a nearby leaf and removes his razor, his soaps, his brush. "It wasn't until I signed on with BGS that I realized there is no choice. It's always the same hand, doing both." He lathers his soap. "Gorslung's. And the Marshal's. And Dr. Reames's—especially his. God, Reames was an incredible man. If the Chancellor was the architect of the Revival, and the Marshal his mason, then Reames was the fire that made the bricks. Bright, brilliant, always going and going and going—well, that was the cocaine, mostly."

Aster chuckles. She holds up the mirror as he brushes soap across his face. "I know of him," she says. "Whyck made us read his 'Dream Treatise' in the Sanitarium."

"Oh yes. That manuscript of his. He'd recite it constantly." Mallory pauses, sliding the razor across his upper lip. "When I signed on, I worked directly under him. It was my first contract. My brother had worked so hard to keep me out of this whole thing, and there I go, right into the thick of it. Right into Reames's playground." He quiets for a bit, working his chin and jaw. "I couldn't read, could barely add, but there I was, at the forefront of bioalchemy. I had a hand in all of it." He splashes his face, satisfied with the result, though Aster can't make out if he's shaved anything at all. "Or, two very small hands, as was needed."

Despite the heat, a shiver runs up her spine. "You were an ecdytoxin extractor," she says.

"I still am, in a way." He folds his razor and sets it aside. "Watch." He wipes a hand on a nearby petal, then picks at the bandage on his head. As the damp gauze peels away, Aster takes in a breath.

The gash Florian has left in his brow is scabbed and patched, though not with blood. It looks as if someone has stitched it shut already, but the threads emerging from the wound are kinked, haphazard, loose-ended. And, Aster realizes as they wriggle in the steam, living.

Mallory pinches one end of a thread and pulls. It tightens, resisting, then loosens, long and raw as a nerve. He draws it from his broken skin, grimacing, releasing a pained sigh.

"God," Aster whispers.

Finally, the thing snaps free. He flinches, then coils it around his finger, holding it out to her. Carefully, Aster reaches for it, drawn to the beauty of its sheen, the soft fuzz of its edges that, when it brushes against her skin, she recognizes as a thousand minuscule legs. It is the same deep crimson as Demetrius's handkerchief.

"Be gentle," he smiles. "The red ones can sting."

★ ★ ★

The dress rehearsal for *The Marriage of Bertram* unfolds with tentative starts and dissonant stops. The opera, already four hours long, is prolonged by lighting difficulties, prop malfunctions, and costuming issues. Demetrius argues with his choreographer downstage, demanding last-minute adjustments. The choreographer pushes back, but at the Chancellor's demand, gives in. Once again, the montage begins.

Demetrius leaps across the stage dressed in a theatrical approximation of teratopod armor, reenacting Bertram Gorslung's rise to power, his early cultural achievements, his grand battles, his artful politicking. As the dancer performs all the heroic deeds his real-life counterpart did not, effortlessly breaking from script when he chooses, peppering his performances with his genius, if risky, improvisations, even Sorav must admit that he does make an excellent Laurel Chancellor.

The rehearsal grinds to a halt when the pigskin dummies are brought forth for the mock beheadings. (The real beheadings, Bertram has made abundantly clear, will take place when Sorav delivers the Extemporists to him.) The prop master struggles to set them up for Demetrius's saber, and the dancer insists they are lopsided, not the same consistency as real flesh and therefore inadequate for practice. Behind him, the crew wheels in the trellis for the wedding scene, the final number in which Bertram will step up to replace Demetrius and Elspeth the ballerina contracted to play her. The moment of the last stinger, when he leans in to kiss his bride, the chute to hell will release a flock of doves, a golden cord will be cut, and a curtain will fall away to reveal his state portrait.

A farce seventeen years in the making. Maximian is glad Hock isn't here to see it. The man has endured many tortures over the years, but nothing like this.

The rehearsal ends late, and on a sour note. Maximian watches Demetrius retreat to the halls backstage, waits for him to undress, and notes which door he takes into the throngs on Conundrum. He calls his car, and cuts sleekly through the crowds after him, metabolic engines emitting a soft, sweet growl. With the advent of Rut Moon, the revelry has taken on a distinctly procreative flavor, a sea of blossoming gowns and fertility symbols. Demetrius proves competent quarry, tracing aimless circles within the crowds, ducking through an alley here and there, the kinds of casual feints made by a man who knows he's being followed.

Sorav catches up to him on the corner of Fourteenth and Bast. He has his driver pull in front of the crosswalk as the dancer steps into it, then opens the door in a cloud of old, bitter perfume.

Demetrius starts, then picks at his cravat. "Eir Marshal," he says. "You frightened me."

"Get in," Sorav says.

"What? Now?" the young man asks. He glances to his left, down the row of streetlamps, then to his right, a wall plastered with posters of his own face. Seeing no easy escape, he climbs inside, barely managing to close the door before the car takes off again. "How may I serve you, Eir Marshal? Another dance?"

"Not tonight."

"I don't think my patron would like that, anyway. You know how jealous he can get." He smiles as the car turns toward the Palas, compass-chimes ringing. The people part for the vehicle, at least most of them, and the driver pays no mind to those that don't.

"I heard about your successor, Eir Marshal," Demetrius says. "You have my heartfelt condolences."

"I'm sure. I have a few questions for you."

"Ask anything. I'll be happy to answer. Of course, I was at rehearsal when it all happened, so I don't know how helpful—"

"Where is Mallory vant Passand?"

Demetrius loses his smile. "Who?"

"You know him. You were in his class at Mongfestun. Until you defected."

"Oh. Yes. He's just a friend from the old days."

"He was there the night of *The Lilies,* wasn't he?"

"I honestly don't know. I never saw him there. And it was … a chaotic night. It's been a long time since I've talked to him."

Maximian sighs. The man is a far better dancer than he is an actor. "You talked to him last month. At Bean Pulp, according to my man in Crypsis."

"Oh. I mean, really *talked*—" When Sorav draws his sidearm, the only part of Demetrius that shakes, and only slightly, is his voice. "I barely know him anymore. He said he was skipping town. Met a girl or something."

"Lie carefully, Eir Prophet. Your career is at stake." Maximian rests the gun at his knee. "Let's make this quick. I'm quite used to people like you and Mallory. Boys angry that the Revival took everything they thought they deserved. I've put down dozens of you strays." He pauses as the car slows, then rolls through the opening Palas gates. "You little debutants. Always think you can outmaneuver the masters." The car whines to a halt. "Well. Get out. I'm not blowing a hole in my chassis if I can help it."

Demetrius obeys, breathing the same way naïve soldiers do when stifling the instinct to flee. Either too frightened or too prudent to run, he can only accept the Marshal's invitation to the Palas's gardens.

"Eir Sorav," the dancer starts. "I know you're a decent man. You're a *good* man."

"Please, Demetrius. You'll only drag this out." The Marshal ushers him through the grand gates of the Palas, into the courtyards of rhododendrons and roses. "I've had a long day, as I'm sure you have. It would be ideal if we get this over with quickly."

"Then should it not wait until tomorrow?" Demetrius asks.

Sorav slows between a pair of golden gazebos, gesturing at the tulips with his firearm. "You know what to do."

Demetrius stares at the flower beds, then lifts a hand to loosen his cravat. "Eir Marshal—"

"Go on." The man obeys, stepping among the tulips. The wind rustles. Thousands of petals open in anticipation of a meal. "Good. Now, where is vant Passand?"

Demetrius begins to shake. "I don't know."

"Which leg do you suppose I should start with, Eir Prophet?"

"I'm serious—I don't know. We move around. Just in case one of us ends up—" He smiles bitterly, gesturing to the hungry blossoms around him. "Takes an age to find each other. Annoying, really."

"Of course," Maximian sighs. "Well, give me your best guess."

"I couldn't—"

"Overcity?" he asks, shifting his aim from Demetrius's head to his heart. "Mid?" Then, between his legs. "Or under?"

"I don't know—*I don't know.*" Demetrius takes a breath, then closes his eyes. "Midcity. Maybe." Eyes still shut, he manages to push out a laugh. "Anything but under."

Maximian watches the young man tremble. He knows he should just shoot the roach and be done with it, but he can't help turning over another question in his head.

Demetrius speaks before he can. "God," he breathes. "You must be sick of it."

"Sick of what, Eir Prophet?"

"All this dreck." He opens his eyes. "I saw your face at rehearsal. You know trash when you see it. Doesn't it disgust you? Gorslung's obscenity of theater?"

"I never cared much for theater to begin with."

"The bastard can't tell art from sewage," Demetrius continues. "I'm going to get rid of all of it. Revivalism is dead. You know it. You're tired of it. You hate Aufhocker more than anyone."

"You mistake me. I love him. Dearly." *If only you knew the things I did for him.* He lifts the gun again. "I just don't care for his works. So—somewhere in the midcity, you think?"

"I mean it, Eir Marshal. I'll be the steward Tiliard needs."

"Answer me."

"Truly, think of how much *better*—"

Sorav fires. The bullet rips through Demetrius's right knee, and he falls, eyes wide, mouth agape. The report is swallowed by the rustle of the garden.

"I asked you a question," Maximian says.

The dancer releases an inarticulate scream.

"Demetrius."

"You can't do it," he moans. "You can't take us all out. You think we haven't infested this place? You've seen how much Tiliard wants me—even without me, it'll keep going. You saw how they loved me." As Sorav raises his sidearm again, Demetrius expels a bitter laugh. "Even Aufhocker loved me. He did, didn't he?"

Sorav pauses. "He said you were better than most."

“Good.” Desperately, cravat loosened, Demetrius pushes to his uninjured knee. “Because that was a gift from Mallory as much as it was from you.”

A shiver runs up Maximian’s spine, a memory pushing through the mayfly. “Who is Aufhocker to him?” he dares to ask, though he already knows. He has known for longer than he’d like to admit, in his gut, if not his head. As Demetrius struggles upward, unfurling his cravat, Sorav can see the bloody threads unspooling from his hand, a guideline leading Mallory all the way to Olaf’s dank cell. He is the Revenant. He can recognize one of his own.

“You didn’t know?” Demetrius laughs. “Even now, you didn’t know. You looked him in the eye and couldn’t see it.”

“See what,” Sorav whispers.

“Aufhocker is his brother.”

The Marshal goes numb. Briefly, the world disappears behind a veil. The gun jumps in his hand, once, then again, then again, and he doesn’t notice. Horror, relief, sorrow, amusement—every feeling floods him at once, opposites vying so violently for primacy that they cancel, static, in his heart. A name sits on his tongue, unsaid, then half said, then whispered aloud for the first time in many years. Laughter follows, empty and cold.

He’s barely even aware he’s killed the dancer until the night gardeners appear with their hoses.

PLATITUDES IN F MAXIMUM

"Look at these fucking *contracts,* Guylag," Bertram says, patting the stacks of papers on his desk. His office has grown since Sreckt was seized, the last of its oaken veneer peeled away to reveal curves of green and amber glass, built in what will come to be known as the Revivalist style. A hundred bouquets dot the room, shedding their scents in a language Guy can't understand, each a peace offering or a veiled threat. "We've got new hires coming in from every corner of the city," Bertram continues. "Clearwater and Strangleroot. Palas defectors. A quarter of these are Crypsis, I'd bet. Maybe a salt or two trying to burrow their way in. Even rats know which way the winds are blowing. But what can I do for you, Lieutenant Moulène?"

"Eir Bertram…" Guy hesitates. He feels naked in the green shafts of day that spill in from the domed skylights. "I … have a request."

"Ask away."

"I would like … given the circumstances…" The look his boss gives him is so attentive, so paternal, that he feels the need to apologize. He wants to tell Bertram he has been a better proprietor than any of the others, that he has been more humane, vastly more just, in his compensation. That Guy believes, wholeheartedly, he will stand atop a changed Tiliard, and that the laurels will look fantastic on him. "I need an advance," he says instead.

"*Need?*" Bertram's smile is boyish, warm. "Aren't you a bold one?"

Guy grits his teeth, gathering the courage to plow through the years of debt still stretching before him. "I'm sorry, Eir Bertram. I've tried to save, but—"

"No, no, I like that. Shows initiative. Tell me how much you need, and I'll see what I can do."

"Eight thousand marks," Guy says quietly.

"Whatever for, my friend?"

"A riverboat ticket."

Bertram takes a slow breath. "You signed a contract."

"Not for me. For Tyro."

"Tyro? Oh—yes. Yes. Of course. It's so hard to get a ticket nowadays." He smiles sadly. "I'd love to help you. If that's what you really want—believe me, I'd hand it over in a heartbeat. Though … it's what … even at your salary, eight, nine years until you pay off your debts? A little far out to be asking for an advance."

"I know."

"Once word gets out I've done you a favor, how many others will bang at my door for one? I can't afford to be seen as a man who treats his contracts flippantly. BGS would fall apart."

"Please," Guy says. "She can't stay here. The city is—"

"Changing?" Bertram stands and rounds the desk, gentle smile on his face. "You ever see a good molt, Guy? Like the kind chimeras go through—seems so suffocating. So violent, doesn't it? You're scared. I get that. You don't want blood on your hands. But there's already so much on the hand that feeds you. You've seen *The Price of Beauty.* You've cleaned up after *Ripest Fruit.* You know what flows down the river that turns this old mill of ours." Bertram reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out a stick of something sweet-smelling. "It's natural that you want to protect Tyro from it. I was the same way about Reames, you know. For a long time, I didn't think he could handle this place. He was a … unique boy. But kids are resilient. Your sister's safe with BGS. She's not out in the streets. Who else would take care of her if something happened to you?" He lights his cigarette, and a strong, attractive scent wafts from the glowing tip. "Relax, Guylag. That wasn't a threat. Shake out your shoulders, have a seat. Just on the floor. I'll sit with you."

Guy says nothing. He only crosses his legs where Bertram pats the marble.

"So," Bertram says, leaning against the desk. "A riverboat. Where were you going to send her?"

"South."

"Just 'south'? That's a bit of a vague journey."

Guy shivers, suddenly struck by the absurdity of his plan. "I have a friend. With a villa. In Dagdrun, I think."

"Do you?" Bertram takes a long, steady drag, clearly trying not to laugh. "You know, sending her away won't keep her safe. What happens in Tiliard spreads to the rest of the valley. Remember Ostlerfell."

Guy hugs himself. "I know."

"There's no getting away from this old stump." Bertram offers Guy the cigarette. "It's got its roots in us as much as in the ground. It's in every part of us. I mean, look at you—you've got your songs, your stories. Not one piece of the Tiliarder canon has spared you. They're permutating through you. It's obvious in your libretti."

Guy inhales, feeling a little sick. "What?"

"I keep track of all my employees, Guylag. Reames accuses me of micromanaging, but really—in this case it's not that hard. You've been leaving little scraps of operettas everywhere. I like them, actually. I actually think they're very good."

Guy is unsure what to make of this. "You do?"

"Can't read the music for the life of me—you never learned common notation, did you?"

"No."

"Ah. Never too late." He takes the cigarette. "You know, I don't want to be anyone's boss, Guylag. I'd rather be a patron." He ashes on the floor. "I know a few people who would love to see what you write. And if you throw a good fight in there, a few poetic deaths, you can make us a killing. Just needs a little editing, and you could do it. You can give Tyro a good life. Here, at home. You can't send her away now."

Guy holds his head and reaches for the cigarette once more. "I … have to."

"That's very noble of you. But you see, you *can't,* Guylag."

Guy stares at him.

"Oh, dear. I'm trying so hard to soften the blow, but you're not getting it. She signed a contract. Weeks ago."

Guy's breath leaves him.

"The stuff's hitting you hard, isn't it? Sorry. Here." When Bertram plucks the cigarette back, Guy's hand stays in place. "Just a little experiment. Third-eye and ecdytoxin. It's perfectly safe in small amounts. Not very good smoked, though, is it? Reames says atomized will be better."

"What's she…" Guy attempts. "What's she…"

"What's she working on? Oh, I couldn't tell you. Paperwork or something." Even in the sickened dizziness of the smoke, Guy can easily grasp the edges of the lie. *We do need small hands down there.*

"Fire her," Guy says. "I'll take her debts. Whatever you've invested into her—into her training, gear—her health, whatever. I'll pay it back. I'll pay all of it back. Twice."

"You're so sweet. Can't believe a bleeding heart like you became an exterminator. You really aren't made for this. You'll be better as a dramaturge." Bertram rests a hand on his back. "It's kind of funny. She wanted to sign on with the name Sigmund. As in the Torturer."

Guy releases a noise that isn't quite a laugh. "Oh, God."

"I wrote 'Clevette.' Much better. I've always wanted to name something Clevette. I don't want to be the kind of man who names his hirelings, but sometimes they make such poor decisions."

"Does … Dawn know?" Guy croaks.

"I should think. He helped her read through the contract."

Guy closes his eyes, clenching his fists around his knees.

"Oh, my friend. Don't berate yourself. It was inevitable. They all grow up. You can't hold her weight forever."

He wants to hit Bertram, more than anything. He wants to break his nose, his jaw, he wants to shove him to the ground and stuff a fistful of those piled-up contracts into his mouth—or, he *wants* to want to—but he can't muster the rage. Bertram's words are so soothing, sober, kind, true. He can't fight them. His will deforms under their weight, his hatred warps, beat by beat of his burning heart, into bittersweet acceptance. He can do nothing but lean against his boss and cry.

"That's good," Bertram says in his ear. "Excellent. Let it out. You want another drag?"

"I can't do this," he moans.

"No, no. Of course not. Here." A gentle hand wraps around his wrist, across the black bar of his first firing. "You need space. And that's no sin. Unfortunately, the space you need isn't in my office."

Guy lets his boss pull him to his feet. "Thank you, Eir Bertram," he finds himself saying.

"That's a good lad. Take a day off. Take two." He guides Guy to the door, arm around his waist. "I'll call admin, see where they placed her. We'll see if we can't give you some time together. How about that?" He puts out his half-smoked cigarette on a nearby bouquet. "You can make it through this. Both of you. Just keep your head down and carry on, Guylag. And don't do anything rash. It'd be a shame if little Clevette never saw those stories of yours come to fruition." He squeezes Guy's shoulder with a kind smile. "Now, that one was a threat."

★ ★ ★

"I wish I had spoken to him," Mallory says. He leads Aster through a dark passage above the Root of Black Eyes, toward the

old Sreckt manufactories. Under his bandages, his threads grow and flail and weave him back together. “I wish I had talked to him because I know we felt the same. We were both trapped, and changing. But I was afraid. And ashamed how right he was, to try to keep me out of all this. Ashamed that I had called him a liar so many times and for once he had told me the truth.”

They emerge onto the mossy factory floor, and he leads her over jammed assembly lines, empty vats, overturned shelves. Surgical equipment and rubber tubing lies scattered among the debris, familiar implements of the Sanitarium, left behind when BGS moved its medical wing to the basement of Metaldrip Defense Industries. Aster squeezes his hand a little tighter as they pass by.

“Dr. Whyck worked down here,” she mutters.

“Before she was made Surgeon General.” Mallory gazes at the vivisection tables. “She’d open up her specimens on these—enemies and employees, dead and alive and in between. This was about the time BGS stopped exterminating the contaminated, and started to collect them. Combatants who were changed by ecdytoxin. *Inspired* by it. Casualties and prisoners.”

“Not prisoners,” Aster says. “Patients.”

“Patients. Of course. Poster children for a new age.” He laughs. “Bertram was greedy. He wouldn’t let anything go to waste. Not even his victims. It was in good taste, wasn’t it? BGS offering a healing hand to their own casualties. Reaping what they’d sown, sifting through all that chaff for a bit of wheat.”

As they traverse the wrecked factory, Mallory points out the teratopod tanks, the shattered remains of a distillation apparatus, the line where they assembled the canisters.

“You remember those days,” he says. “You remember what it was like up top. In the early weeks of the Revival, when the Palas was giving us everything they had. Every day another battle. Every day another species added to the *Manual.* I barely saw my brother. I avoided him, and when I did run into him, I’d roll down my sleeve, I wouldn’t let him touch me. I don’t think he knew. For weeks, he didn’t know. He was busy with his own work. When he wasn’t fumigating, he was rebuilding. He was decontaminating the galleries, throwing art into the fire, or sending it down to us in R&D.

“However fast things moved up there, they were faster down here. The teratopods grew and ate and grew. We’d get a crate of paintings and broken vases and dining silver looted from upstairs, and we’d throw it all into the tanks. Those things were connoisseurs. They loved Dagdrun wine. And cocaine, and novels, and jewelry. Love letters could make such an exquisite toxin. A good vant Wron could make a fume that turned buildings into a billion tiny pebbles. Those old statues of Bacher’s dragonfly could make anything molt into glass. And Merrett—well, you never knew what a Merrett would do.”

He pauses at a vine-netted mound at the center of the factory floor. Braced in rusted steel ribs, the tank is the size of a small house. Like the rest of the place, it is deformed with the hallmark growths of Revivalist weaponry, but remains mostly intact. He climbs to the top and gazes down the shaft at its center.

“One of the teratopods,” he says, “outgrew the others. Reames told me it was supposed to be that way. It outgrew the others, and ate them. Then, it ate one of us. It got too big for the tank, so Reames had it dragged out here—over there, right where all those cables are dangling. We strung it up, pushed the hooks through the spiracles. And we continued harvesting.

“The other kids … all of us were stung, at least once. We took it on the fingers, or the palms. Most of us just burst open, sometimes quickly, sometimes not. We’d start to grow things. Make things from ourselves. One started to dance and couldn’t stop. The one that Reames always called the Doll died in her sleep, and when Whyck opened her up she was stuffed with this … cotton-like substance. Every organ, completely replaced. We pulled out her guts and used them to absorb ecdytoxic spills.”

“Oh, Mal,” Aster breathes. He doesn’t look at her, only the dark beyond the tank.

“Reames just brought in more,” he says. “There were always more of us, from Strangleroot, or Orphanwell. Some just looking for glory, throwing their lot in with BGS. Some were contaminated, and had nowhere else to go. Oh, look. Witchfruit.” Aster follows his finger and spies a bulbous flower under a conveyor belt. It trembles in the darkness, skin expanding and contracting like breath. Another happy *Manual* entry, though she can’t remember which number.

“It makes a great perfume,” Aster says. “Subtle, sharp. Good for blades.”

“For me, or for you?”

“You think I’m nimble enough for heroics? I’d cough out a lung. I’m a composer, not a performer.” She bends to pluck the flower. “So … when were you stung?”

“I don’t know, actually. It wasn’t just once—there were dozens of little accidents. Tears in my iron-vine sleeve. Or I’d come out of the tank just knowing. And then there were the—well, the things Reames tried out on us. Shots and blood draws and these little … experiments. In the end, I never knew if it was the teratopod who changed me, or him. He was relentlessly curious. And we couldn’t stop him—we didn’t want to. We’d line up to let him try things out on us. We were in awe of him, all of us. Me, Whyck, the other kids, we were all terrified and entranced. Even the Marshal—or, I guess he was still just a captain back then—the rare times he’d come down to the factory, treated him with caution.

“Reames was a marvelous teacher. Showed me what a true ecdytoxic molt looked like, how it’s the speed of the process

that defines its violence. Only timing determines if something blooms and decays like a perfume, or if it tears a whole city apart. Timing is what separates an action from an accident." He frowns and descends the tank. "As the Poet-King says: 'Time will blind the all-seeing and kill the deathless. Time will stopper the source of the Catoptric.'"

Aster wheezes out a laugh. "Mal. *Poet-King* is satire. That line was a joke."

"You think I care?"

He drops down beside her, and she places the deflated witchfruit in his breast pocket. When he raises a hand to touch it, she holds his bare wrist, running her fingers over his scars. A thread pokes out from under his sleeve, and she pulls it loose.

"Reames was fascinated with them," he says. "They reacted to ecdytoxin. Sometimes violently. They hate it, and they're hungry for it." He lets Aster turn his palm in her hand. "I could never tell if they were a part of me, or if they were something else, and I was only their host. They were always eager to break the surface of my skin. In those days, with all that ecdytoxin around, you could pull them from me by the handful. Reames kept them in jars on his shelf, but he never got around to finding a use for them."

Aster lets the tiny thing wrap around her finger. It is a blue one, bright as Ostlerfell dye, toothless and full of wonder. When she lifts it close to her face, it writhes at the touch of ecdytoxin still on her breath. "I could find a use," she whispers.

"Go on, then. I'm your muse." His smile is joyless, determined. "Name the limb, vralen, and I'll cut it open for you."

SAINT GUYLAG AND THE DRAGON

For the first time in nearly a month, Guy stumbles back to the Birdcall Hotel. He ascends the stairs and crawls into bed, where he waits for Bertram's smoke to wear off, too devastated to cry, too helpless to move. He watches dusk fall outside the window, unable to close his eyes, because all he sees is Dawn, so sharp in his uniform, watching Tyro's thumb press against paper, guiding her hand through the loop of needle tape and snapping it, white gloves on black ink. Giving her a fatherly nod while he strikes at Guy's heart, a strike swift and precise and irrevocable, like an artful soldier's should be. How could he not have known—even from across town, even without seeing her, he should have known. He should have sensed it, if not in Tyro, at least in Dawn.

Guy rolls to his back, body tingling, mourning all the lost years, all the wasted effort, the miles and miles and miles he'd walked for her that brought him nowhere. He turns, moaning, for hours, until he feels his mind clear, until his hurt, his confusion, his helplessness all coalesce, funneled through a single channel into a searing pulse of rage. His ear throbs with percussion, with the grinding of his teeth, the thump of his heart. In the seething darkness, his head spins, or, his body spins but his head stays still, snapping, like a dancer's, on a single focus. He sees past the blur of Bertram's complacent smile, past Dawn in his golden epaulets, past Three's ghost clicking her disappointed tongue. Through the haze of hopeless fury, one thing is still clear to him: He has to see her.

At the first call of the night shift, when the company jingle plays through the halls, Guy rises. He doesn't march to the bulletin and read over the day's allocations; instead, citing Bertram's generous offer, he takes the shift off. He returns to his room and sits on his bed, watching the shadows under the doorframe, waiting for the footsteps to decrescendo. Then, he gathers his effects. He shaves, shakes out his mask, but instead of donning his iron vine, he slips into his formal uniform, white trimmed in silver. He straps on his sidearm, his ceremonial saber, slings his golden respirator over his shoulder. By the time he leaves his room, he looks every bit the sanitary specialist he is presumed to be. He walks down the stairs to the hotel lobby, past the warped piano, the bar, through the front doors, and calls a company car.

He expects to be intercepted, questioned—but the young Tender Guard recruit defers to his rank and seniority. Without a word, she drives him straight to the lift by the Sreckt factories, then totters around the car to open the door for him. (He can almost hear Three laugh at the spectacle.) He makes his way to the elevator, and either because he's seen so often around Dawn and Bertram, or because he's channeling the tight-lipped authority of General Bianco, the operator asks no questions except where he would like to go.

"Contriver floor," he says, and the young man, either understanding his request or too embarrassed to admit he doesn't, begins the journey downward. Guy sits on the leather chaise as the lift descends, clenching and unclenching his fists to keep them from shaking.

He is afraid. Deathly afraid of what he will find, and of what he won't, what he will do if she's there, what he will do if she's not—if he will tear the place apart, looking for her corpse in the ecdytoxic waste, if he will find that madman Reames and torture her location out of him.

Cold, disembodied, he watches himself from afar. He can almost feel the darkened seats around him, the caverns of the theater; he can feel the gaze of a little usher boy scooting to the edge of a gargoyle to observe Guylag kneeling center stage with his head bowed, a long, monstrous puppet encircling him. The child watches carefully, and though he's seen this performance a dozen times, he hasn't the faintest idea where the script will go.

The elevator doors open. A corridor stretches on either side, strung with Catoptric-powered lights. Machines buzz and mumble in the haze. Somewhere, a bell rings, and a rush of water follows. Guy looks to his left, then right, unsure where to go until he hears faint, malformed music.

He straightens his shoulders and follows the muffled sounds, eyes darting, ear craning for changes in the gradient of toxin. He stiffens when a pair of R&D workers pass by, but they don't spare him a second glance.

Strange noises spill from the grates and vents above him, pincers snapping, lips forming pleas, threats, insults. Cascading fractals of ecdytoxic growth spill from the walls, made of human or bug or city flesh. Unsure if he is walking through a factory, a laboratory, or hell, Guy follows the agonized music, step by careful step, to a wide door of petrified wood. There, he hesitates, heart in his mouth, unready for whatever lies beyond.

No better way to brave the dark, sings Saint Guylag with a tap to his visor, *than completely blind.*

He dons his mask and pushes open the door. He steps into the haze of misty fumes, painted in sickly green light, and his heart drops.

There it is, huge and bloated and beautiful. The teratopod dangles from a hundred hooks, undulating in sedated agony. Tubes run from spiracles wide as streetcar windows. Its mandibles twitch, pried open with steel. A dozen children run along its length, slender wrists gliding into the crevices of its mouth, the chinks in its terga. Its tongue is clamped, stretched so every dripping barb is exposed, raw under the relentless pull of gloved fingers. Protected by nothing but iron vine, the children diligently extract ecdytoxin, squeezing strings from throbbing glands, from between splayed mandibles, from the tender underside of its struggling legs. Some of them harvest with two or three handlike things sprouting from one wrist, some limp around the creature dragging elongated, extra limbs, yet others carry changes almost too subtle for the eye—a strange gait, a heavy wheeze, a vibrating tic.

Guy watches them, speechless, for a minute, for two. An acid heat rises in his throat when he recognizes one of them, a helmeted child whose quick hands he's seen work in Three's shop, sewing addenda, embroidering an oversized skirt.

"Ty," he croaks. His voice is weak, unheard. He removes his mask and calls out again.

This time, a dozen glass visors turn to him, and a few bare faces. Most of the children see his uniform and resume their work. Tyro's hands fall to her sides, and she tenses. She glances over her shoulder, scanning the factory floor, then the gantries above. She takes a careful step toward him, then breaks into a sprint.

She barely pulls off her helmet and gloves before she throws herself into his arms. He embraces her, stroking her curls, ignoring her noxious smell, the stains on her sleeves.

"What are you doing here?" she hisses. "You can't slow us down. Reames will kill us."

"Ty," he moans. His heart skips a beat as he squeezes her wrists, thumb pressing against the dark ink. A few scabs decorate her skin, unhealed wounds from which tiny strings of venom grow. When he runs his glove over them, they resonate with the toxin in his ear. His blood boils so hot, so blindingly furious, he can barely push out the words.

"How many times?" he whispers. "How many times did it sting you?"

Tears gather in her eyes. "I don't know."

Guy stands, burning, tympani rolling in his ear, and steps toward the teratopod. He draws his blade and the children scatter, ducking under oozing, broken legs and fleeing to the shadows. The creature struggles with a peristaltic wave, a bloated, suffering crop heavy for harvest. Its mandibles clench at the glint of his saber, pulling against the cords and hooks. Guy stares at the stretched proboscis, the carpet of barbs dripping with ecdytoxin, and dons his golden facepiece. Then he brings his blade down at the base of the creature's tongue.

Metal sinks into flesh, but not cleanly. The appendage does not detach after the first blow. With a spurt of silver blood it twists, struggling to recoil, nearly wrenching the saber from Guy's hand. Cables snap taut, children scream, and so does the teratopod, writhing and spilling ecdytoxin from severed ducts. Guy's vision narrows—he wrenches back his weapon and brings it down on the helpless tongue again, and again, and again—and when the appendage comes loose, when his blade finally tears through the ropes of muscle, he doesn't stop. Mindless, armored only in his leechbane jacket, he hacks at the monster's mouth, its glands and mandibles, its pinned forelegs, big around as his waist. Soft, pale appendages appear between the chinks in the creature's armor, raw and unformed, attempts at defense or reproduction—Guy doesn't know, and doesn't care. If the teratopod splits apart, if a hundred more blossom from this corpse, he'll kill those too, he'll hunt down every fucking one of them.

Silver blood spills from the creature's wounds, musical wails from the void of its throat. Chains rattle like castanets. A hook snaps, releasing a barbed mandible, and Guy slashes up to meet it. As his blade cracks through chitin and sinks into muscle, he feels himself cut through the city's heart, slamming the metal through bark and stone, severing canals in gushes of water; he cracks open the surface of the Catoptric, breaking the mirror through which Tiliard is propagated; he shatters Bertram's unassailable smile, his mother's spinning wheel, the bishop's pearl collar, Dawn's armored chest, the BGS insignia on his uniform, his heart—

"Stop him! *Stop* him, you shits!"

Reames Gorslung slams into Guy with his giant hands first, one grasping for his neck, the other his saber. Guy sidesteps, yanking the sword back in a spray of raw ecdytoxin. He twists out of Reames's grasp, and the blade draws across the alchemist's sleeve, his shoulder, his bare jaw—Guy withdraws in time to spare a fatal strike, but not in time to spare a fatal nick.

The wound appears in a thin, shallow red streak, then blossoms, unfolding from split skin in an upswell of blood. Reames pitches forward, grasping for Guy, for his teratopod, blinded by the flowering expansion of his flesh. His jaw breaks, folds back on itself, formless and wet as clay. His face disappears, obliterated by twitching muscle and a mosaic of growing teeth, row after spiraling row. He falls to his knees and gropes, moaning, until he finds the proboscis. He flattens his warped body over it, shielding it from Guy's next strike.

Guy stumbles back as the alchemist takes the limb into his arms, cradling it even as it violently sculpts him. His throat splits open, releasing a vibrating net of flesh, and a bloodcurdling wail.

Numb, terrified, Guy does not know he's dropped his saber until Tyro is pulling at his sleeves, urging him toward the door. Wordlessly, they shed their contaminated clothes, she her iron vine and he his overcoat; they drop their masks, their gloves, leaving a trail of equipment behind them as they rush to the door. Somewhere above them, an alarm begins to blare.

★ ★ ★

"We were lucky that night," Mallory says. "Really lucky."

"How so?" Aster asks.

"That was the same night BGS made its advance on the Palas." He gestures to a narrow passageway in the old factory wall. The tunnel is overgrown with ecdytoxic boils, statues of gnarled wood, knots agape like mouths. "That's the route we took, if I remember. We followed it blindly for a while, until we reached one of my brother's old errander paths."

Aster glances at the witchfruit in his breast pocket. It seems to breathe with him—inflating its petal sacs with the cadence of his voice.

"The Marshal was distracted that night," Mallory says. "One of the biggest jobs of his career, it turned out. We wouldn't have gotten nearly as far as we did if he wasn't busy ushering in Tiliard's grand new age. Still, of course, he came after us. It was easy enough for him. He knew my brother. He knew the routes he would take. He knew the places he would hide, the people he would beg for help."

"You made it, though," Aster says. "Or else you wouldn't be here. You must've made it to a riverboat eventually."

"We did." Mallory's voice falters. "I wish we hadn't."

★ ★ ★

Sorav has always suspected there was a Crypsis man or two among his gardeners. His suspicions are confirmed when, even before Demetrius's body is cold, he receives a phone call from the Chancellor. His hands are still shaking when he picks up the earpiece.

"You *shot* me," Gorslung growls. "You *ass.* You fucking shot me—and when I was young and handsome, too. How am I supposed to revive Tiliard if I'm a corpse?"

"Prophet was an Extemporist," Sorav says.

"So *what*? You couldn't tell, Max? It's fucking obvious from his dancing—he was still so *good!* You could've waited until after the wedding."

"You asked me to take care of the bugs in your opera, Eir Chancellor."

"Not *him*! He was extraordinary." He pauses. "Fuck. What to do now? If this flops, Max, if Aufhocker fucking *flops*—the swine at the *Arbuscle* will never let it go. I'll cut off Olaf's thumbs myself. And I'll make you hold him down while I do it."

Sorav clenches his jaw. "Calm down, Chancellor."

"Fuck you. This is my *life* here. My entire life! Who's the understudy? Is he good? And don't you tell me he's one of them, too—I swear to God—round them up, Max. Anyone with an Extemporist bent—you see anyone so much as ad-libbing in the chorus, slot them in for the beheading scene."

Your fiancée included? Sorav decides not to ask. "It will be a long scene," he says instead.

"Fine. Props will build a gallows. I don't care. I can change plans. I can improvise as well as they can. Take them out—take out the whole fucking cast, for all I care. I'll write a check. Make new contracts. I've got good perfumes for public apologies." He pauses. "You find vant Passand yet?"

"No, but…" he starts, and can't finish. At least he knows where to look now, all those old haunts. The bathhouse, the factory, the routes she and her boys used to take.

"But what? Is he high up in their ranks or something? Do they even *have* ranks, or do they just switch out like the dancers in *The Contriver Worm*?" Bertram laughs bitterly. "What about him, Max?"

"He … used to work for us."

"What?"

"In the teratopod labs. With your nephew."

The line hushes. For a few seconds, there is only flat static. "Really. One of the kids?"

Sorav's throat aches. He suddenly can't speak the name aloud, not the one he knows. "Yes."

"God," the Chancellor breathes. "He survived a long time. Tough kid."

"He's … Guylag's little sister."

"Who?" The line goes silent, then sparks with laughter. "Guylag? Oh, dear. *Really?*"

"Yes," Sorav whispers.

Another pause. "God … that's *good,* Max. That's really good. Did you plan for this? Did you come up with this?"

"He killed Florian. Of course I didn't."

"No, no, you wouldn't have. You don't have that kind of classic Vaughnian sensibility." The line quiets, but only for a moment. When the Chancellor speaks again, Sorav can hear the gleeful gears whirring in his voice. "God—well, can't say I was expecting *that.* It's just like Aufhocker—just like him, isn't it? Gets thicker by the hour—good God, how on earth…" One last chuckle. "Mallory, then, is it? I suppose we should send him some sort of invitation."

★ ★ ★

Tyro shakes in Guy's arms, but she doesn't cry. As the alarms blare, as the Sreckt factory doors slam shut in squeals of petrified wood, they crawl through the veins of the midcity. Blind, terrified, with nothing but his under-uniform and his sidearm, Guy leads his sister along a mossy corridor, then out onto a flickering boulevard, guessing and second-guessing his route until he finds a familiar tunnel. He pulls her through the passageway and diverts to a blind pouch, an old smuggling stopover long since abandoned. There, he examines her in the fungal glow. She doesn't flinch as he runs his fingers across the threads growing from her wounds.

"Oh, princeling," he whispers. "Princeling. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

"It's okay," she answers. "The others have it worse. It's all right. It's not bad."

"Ty, why did you do it? Why didn't you—"

"I wanted to help us. I needed … I wanted money for the trip. I wanted to prove you wrong. To prove you were a liar."

Rage burns in his gut. He wants, desperately, to shout at her, to strike her, to tell her once again that working is the worst way to get any sort of money, but he only draws her close. "You're so good," he tells her. "We're going to do it. You're right. I am a liar. Princeling, we're going to do it. We're getting on that boat."

This time, she breaks down sobbing. Sickened, elated, he rocks her in the musty dark, just as he used to when she was tiny, wrapping himself over every part of her, tight as a carapace.

"We're going," he says. "Tonight. We're catching the last boat. I just need to get our tickets. Give me an hour. A few hours—I need to go upstairs for a bit."

"Don't leave," she starts. "Don't leave me. Take me with you."

"All right." He grips her bare shoulders, wider, stronger than he expects. "Stay hidden. They'll be searching for us—" He swallows. "We can't come back to Tiliard. Ever."

"I know."

"Good." He takes an unsteady breath. "Who do you wanna be this time? We could be the Overlook Cousins—like in *Birth of the Deathbed.* By the time we get on that boat, you could be Philippe and I'll be Wachner. We could brush up our card skills."

"I want to use our thumb names," she whispers. "Like gentlemen. Like you promised."

"Grub. We can't."

"I want it to be *real,* Em. I want it to be real this time."

"We—" He holds his tongue. It seems obscene to him, a dangerous sort of nakedness, to openly use a name free of debt, given not to refer to his contracts, but to himself. And yet, after secreting them away so diligently for so long, they may be a safer shield than any names appropriated from the stage.

"All right," he whispers. His hand trembles as he smooths back Tyro's hair. "All right. The moment we get on that boat. Just like we used to pretend. Eirs Mallory and Emmory vant Passand." He squeezes her tight, daring to imagine his sister not as the terrified grub, but the beautiful young gentleman she'll become. "Practice your diction. If you want to be called Eir, you have to speak well. And gamble wisely. And learn the rules of a duel."

Tyro nods.

"Tonight, you have to do exactly what I tell you. *Exactly.* If I tell you to hide, you hide. If I tell you to wait, you wait. If I tell you to leave me behind, you do that. You do everything in your power to stay alive."

"I won't leave you."

"Please, *please,* Mallory—you have to promise me."

"I can't."

"You can."

"How?"

"With words, you dolt. A gentleman keeps his word. Now say a word, and keep it."

"I promise."

"You better mean that, Mal."

"I do."

"Good—I'll hold you to it. You're not a liar. Gentlemen don't lie." He pulls his sibling close one last time. "Stay behind me, stay hidden. If anyone calls you by any name other than Mallory, don't run to them. Even me. Especially me. I love you, Eir Mallory vant Passand." He stands. "Stay strong. You're half iron, on your dad's side. Never forget that."

★ ★ ★

Often considered to be Maximian Sorav's magnum opus, his march on the Judicial Palas is the grandest, and most destructive, of his works. While hints of his strategic leitmotifs appear here and there in earlier battles, the themes of Revivalist warfare don't come to full fruition until this swift and forceful performance.

The Marshal Exultant, in anticipation of the advance, has already pulled out his last stops. His factories flood the roots with toxic runoff, his prisoners are brought up from the vaults as soldiers and subjects. Fruitlessly, frantically, his laboratories attempt to re-create BGS's weaponry, through biomathematics and synthetic alchemy, but nothing, no matter how vile, how caustic, can resist the generative violence of ecdytoxin.

The siege of the Palas begins with a sweeping overture. A contingent of the BGS Tender Guard, a good deal of it former Palas Infantry, marches through the gates preceded by a flood of ecdytoxic gas. The Exultant's gunmen, equipped with respirators and iron vine and staked out on the slitted battlements, open fire.

BGS raises its nozzles against the Exultant's defenses, dissolving them in showers of silver liquid. Stone softens; pores appear in the barricades, then widen, welcoming the footmen of the Tender Guard into the Palas courtyard. A rondo of return fire rattles the air; then comes the grenadiers' counterpoint. Light germinates, malignant colors flood the sky. Soldiers fall like Rebau subjects, draped on stairwells and in one another's arms.

Dawn sweeps through the Palas, reshaping every hall with violent finesse. He clears the armories, the garages, the meeting halls, destroying every portrait, every statue, every carpet dyed in Ostlerfell Blue. He deconstructs the ballistae in the garden, burning the hedge maze and turning the apple trees to glass. More of a gesture of beneficence than an apology, he spares the parts of the Palas he knows Guy might appreciate. He leaves the band room untouched; he bypasses a baroque writing desk. As he marches through the executive suites, killing the Exultant's servants, his sycophants and concubines, he plants the seeds of a large, elegant bedroom.

The Marshal Exultant holds out in the grand solarium of his audience hall. As the glowing fumes of ecdytoxin spill across the domed windows, he stands atop the dais with his golden rifle in hand. Surrounded by the many devoted, expendable limbs of the First Autotomic Brigade, he readies his aim, pointing his sights down the long Ostlerfell carpet.

He recognizes Corporal Flint immediately, even through the haze and his respirator—he recognizes the gait of the upstart, the entitled grunt who had survived Broken Horse at the expense of his son. When the intrepid corporal advances down the hall, preceded by columns of colored mist, the Exultant adjusts his aim, one foot on the shoulder of his kneeling chief officer. He does not step out to greet his enemy; he eschews speeches, refuses grand philosophical or aesthetic confrontations—to the disappointment of his eager historian-librettist, who crouches at the edge of the room, scratching down all she witnesses. With the curt restraint that defines his Neo-Repressionist style, he pulls the trigger and shoots Flint in the head. His aim is perfect, his timing pristine. A single bullet passes through the man's helmet—or appears to—and he staggers.

The Exultant pauses in a cautious swell of victory. He lowers his rifle, just for a moment, only to see his enemy regain his footing. Flint lifts his own carbine, woven with cannulas, and fires back. A shower of ecdytoxic bullets sails through the light, piercing the iron vine of the Autotomic Brigade. The men fall, stems of ruby sprouting from their wounds. The Exultant watches his sacrificial limbs break and warp, and then, when only he is left, helpless on a pile of wasted offerings, four bullets tear through his abdomen.

The victorious corporal approaches. He kneels over the Exultant and plucks his medals from his collar, reclaiming the victories that had been stolen from him, the accolades for his service and sacrifice, restitution for the terrible misfortune of surviving. Then, still enveloped in the swirls of toxin, Dawn removes his helmet and spits on his former employer. The phlegm is bloody, tinged in silver, and is taken, by the soldiers at his side, for a bullet.

Just before a messenger arrives bearing the news of Lieutenant Moulène's treachery, Dawn reclines on the dais, lights a cigarette, and breathes a long sigh of relief. In a few minutes, when the messenger leans down to his ear, he will go pallid, and his triumph will sour in his mouth. He will listen, wordless, to the extent of Guylag's betrayal: the damage to the Sreckt factory, the enraged, crippled teratopod spewing raw ecdytoxin along the machinery, the weaponry, all the precious implements of his art. Then he will stand, toss his cigarette, and without explanation, order a small contingent of Tender Guard to follow him to the cathedral of the Parish of the Last Monday.

For now, he basks in blessed relief, in justice, in the beauty of the Exultant's blossoming wounds, skin and muscle twisting

into lovely little roses to reveal the smooth bone beneath. “Bell,” he says to the nearest Tender Guard. “When you toss this one, keep his skull for me.”

VESPERS OF THE LAST MONDAY

The full Armistice Moon marks the bishop's farewell soirée. The night before his departure, he welcomes his remaining allies into his home. One by one, they enter the foyer, shaking windblown white petals from their coats and bidding the couple a safe trip to Dagdrun. Clergy fold their hands and bow, doctors doff their hats, lawyers offer brandies rescued from idyllic ruins downstream, courtesans shimmy from glittering overcoats. The Minister of Aesthetics brings her finest cigars, the Surgeon General his wife's sweetest tarts, and the Secretary of Internal Reform brings the same bottle of wine as he does every time. As the guests seat themselves around the table, the bishop toasts the memory of the fallen, emphasizing the necessity of maintaining civility in these trying times. The group raises their glasses, devoted to this small act of normalcy. Across town, an ecdytoxic bomb detonates, spilling a gust of poison and a booming mimicry of the closing chords of Tasarte's "Strangleroot Tarantella."

When seven courses have come and gone and the Secretary deals out the first poker game of the night, the doorbell rings. The footman expects a straggler, the University dean or some relation of the Chancellor devoted to a fashionably late arrival—instead he opens the door to reveal a disheveled young man, stinking of mud and rhizotoxins and panting like a dog. The footman, of course, slams the door, but not before the undercity scum jams a boot against the frame. He pushes into the house and strikes the porter with his sidearm. The man falls back, yelp covered by a burst of laughter from the poker table. He cowers in the corner just as the bishop enters the foyer, aglow with wine, leaving a trail of laughter behind him. When he sees his exterminator, his smile vanishes, his wineglass slips from his hand.

"*Hock,*" he hisses. The young man motions him into the scullery, and the bishop, glancing over his shoulder at his ignorant guests, obeys. "What do you think you're *doing*?"

In the dim candlelight, a silverfish runs over his slipper, and a gun's muzzle presses against his silken gut.

"Is that *real?*" he asks. "What's even in there? Phytothrin?"

"Lead," Hock answers.

"Are you … my son, are you *robbing* me?"

"Yes."

"*Now?*" He clicks his tongue. "Could it not have waited?"

"I need help. Real help. It's urgent."

"Yes, well, you know I want to help you in whatever way I can, but my boat is in the morning—" A curt query is shouted from the adjacent hall, and the bishop leans toward the foyer. "It's fine, my dears! Carry on!" When he turns back to Hock, his face burns with anger. "My son, this is *highly* inappropriate."

"I need tickets."

"Tickets. To *what*? *Don Javunech*?"

"Out of town. I need to go, *now.* I need money for the smuggler's fare. At least fifty thousand."

"What's this about? What have you done?" The bishop's rage fades, blood draining from his face. Without diverting his gaze, he answers another shout from the dining hall. "No, no! It's perfectly all right!"

"You're going to come upstairs with me," Hock rasps. "You're going to open your safe, and I'm going to take everything inside."

The bishop's face contorts, in fear, and sadness, and a little burn of arousal. "My son, if you were this desperate, you should've called."

Hock jams the muzzle into the bishop's stomach, teeth clenched, and begins to cry. "Fuck you. Upstairs. Now."

"You're not good at this, my boy. Put that down and go home. We'll talk later. I have guests."

"What is *happening* out here?" The bishop's wife stumbles into the scullery. When she sees the two of them in the dusty shadows, her eyes widen. "Oh, no. No, *no.* This is too far. This is going much too far."

"I didn't invite him, dear," the bishop says. "Look, son—"

His words falter at a sudden pounding at the door. Wood jumps under a knocking fist, then, after a moment of silence, a boot. Hock darts from the scullery and across the foyer, and the bishop follows.

"Don't answer that," Davide barks at the footman. "Hock—who is that? Who have you brought here?"

"Don't let them in," Hock wheezes, stumbling past the harpsichord and up the stairs.

"What have you *done*?"

“Tell them I already left. I never came. Don’t let them find me. Buy me time. I need time. *Please.*” He disappears down the hall.

In the dining room, the game continues without its dealer. “Think something’s burned in the kitchen?” the bishop doesn’t hear one guest ask.

“I think it’s a break-in,” says a second.

“One of his weird games, no doubt,” sighs the Secretary. “I wish he wouldn’t do that with guests around. It’s unseemly.”

Another knock rattles the door. Neither the bishop nor his footman answers, but that doesn’t matter. A few more kicks, then a bang of a small explosive, and the oak panels split open. The wood gives way, snapping off its hinges in a puff of ecdytoxin. By the time the captain of the Tender Guard steps into the foyer, the door is no longer a door, but a melted statuette of splinters and glassy sap.

The man is tall, solemn. A respirator and mask hang around his neck, his pauldrons are stamped with gold and the centipedal sigils of BGS. When he steps into the mirrored light, he fixes his cold gaze on the bishop. It is the same he wears in nearly every photograph, in the posters, in the sketches that have been selling like wildfire down on Conundrum.

“Fuck,” Davide breathes.

Corporal Flint’s eyes pass across the foyer. “Where is he?”

“Where—who?”

He sighs with a hardened calmness. “Don’t make me search this house, Eir Bishop.”

“I don’t know who…”

“Tell him,” whispers his wife, shaking. “Oh, Davide, just tell him.”

“I don’t—” The soldier’s eyes meet the bishop’s, and a lump travels down his throat. “Upstairs,” he croaks. “Right. Door at the end of the hall.”

The corporal marches past. A quartet of his underlings stands watch in the foyer, arms at the ready. Davide stays frozen to the spot, arms around his wife, ears perked over the swell of chatter rising from the table. Summoned by the commotion, his guests appear at the arch to the dining hall. They eye the Tender Guardsmen, then the look on their host’s face. Carefully, they gather their things, thank the bishop for his hospitality, and disappear.

Davide doesn’t move. Above him, the bedroom door slams. Floorboards creak. Three gunshots. Then silence.

Several minutes pass. When the corporal returns, he is alone, uniform splattered with red. The bishop knows better than to ask if Hock is dead—instead, he only grips his tearful wife. The soldier passes him, radiating anger. When he hesitates, turning at the doorway, Davide is very sure he will shoot him where he stands.

“Eir Bishop,” the soldier says. “What was that man’s name?”

The bishop’s mouth hangs open, but his wife answers with a little squeak, “H … ock.”

“What was that?”

“Hock. It’s sh-short for something. We don’t know what.”

“He never told you his thumb name?”

“N … no.”

“Thank you, Vra Bishop.” The soldier, to Davide’s infinite relief, seems to soften, just a bit. “You have ten minutes to vacate this place before I fumigate. If you’re not out of the city by morning, I will kill you both.” He nods politely, lifts his carbine, then strides out the door.

* * *

Normally when Guy robs the Bishop of the Last Monday, he does so in costume, aided by a ladder the couple leaves for him at the open window. This time, after he clears everything he can from the dressing table and the jewelry boxes, there is no ladder waiting. This time, it will be a long and painful drop into the garden.

He doesn’t care. As long as he can limp back to Tyro, as long as he can make it to the docks, it doesn’t matter how many broken bones rattle along with him.

“Guylag.”

The voice barely slows him. Pockets heavy with jewelry, he redoubles his efforts wrestling with the window. Unwilling to turn, hands trembling, he shoves open the glass and steps into the empty night air. He hesitates only to gauge the height of the drop before he throws himself to the will of gravity.

Dawn’s will is stronger. A large hand grasps his arm, another his waist, and drags him back through the window. He struggles, reaching for his sidearm. When he and Dawn disentangle, he pulls it from his belt.

“Have you gone insane?” Dawn growls. “What have you done? Are you trying to *destroy* us?”

“Don’t touch me,” Guy starts.

"What did you do to the teratopod? To *Reames*?"

"What did they do to Tyro?" he growls, but Dawn doesn't seem to hear him.

"Bertram's got every officer in BGS out looking for you. He's got every checkpoint blocked. He's sweeping the docks. Orders are to shoot you on sight. You and Ty. In the feet first, then the knees. One at a time, so the other can watch."

"Oh, God," Guy breathes.

"You're lucky I found you first," Dawn says. "Don't point that fucking thing at me. After everything I've done for you—put it down, Guy."

"You sold my sister," he rasps.

"Put that down."

"Why? To hurt me?"

"She *wanted* this," Dawn says. "This is what she needed. If you had only asked—"

"She's hurt. She's been stung—"

"So have *we*! We're better for it." He steps forward, anger melting to resignation. "It doesn't matter now. You've thrown it away. I was going to give you both a life. I was going to give you everything you ever wanted."

"Fuck you," Guy says feebly.

Dawn reaches for the firearm. "Don't run, you coward. Don't you dare run from this. He'll only hunt you down—"

A crack shakes the bedroom. Guy shuts his eyes, squeezes the heated grip, sharp scent of gunpowder in his nose. He shakes, waiting for the deafening ring to leave his ears, for the sound of a grunt, a thump, the smell of blood. When he opens his eyes, Dawn stands unharmed before him. Over his shoulder is a hole in the drywall.

"You can't," he says, too calmly. "I know you. I know you can't do it. Not to me."

"Back off," Guy quavers.

"I love you." Fearless, Dawn again steps forward. "Goddamn me, even now, I love you. I won't lose you. You're going to survive this. Whatever the cost. *Whatever* cost, you fucking bastard—"

He darts for the sidearm, and Guy shoots him again. Twice this time—Dawn falls against the wall, one bullet passing through the flesh of his arm, the other glancing past a rib. He stumbles, more surprised than hurt, groping at the bedside table for balance. Too quickly, he recovers, blood spreading from his side, his sleeve, tinged in a halo of silver. He barely hesitates before hurtling toward Guy with a snarl of cold fury. "You *stupid*—"

Guy rushes for the window. Heart in his throat, he leaps over the sill and drops into the garden. His stomach turns as he falls—boughs snap against his shins, his hands, knocking the gun from his grip. He hits a wide branch, twisting over his heels and landing on the flower beds with a shock of pain. He rolls in the dirt, winded. He's sure something is broken, but he has no time to find out what. Fists closed around the jewelry in his pockets, he pulls himself to his shaking feet, glances up at the window, and limps back to the misty street.

★ ★ ★

"I waited for him, right where he told me to," Mallory says. He gazes at the undercity sunset, legs dangling over the catwalk, while Aster plucks pact-rose from the tangled guardrail. "He sat me behind the hedges, about a block from the churchyard. He said he was going down the road and told me not to move, no matter what. He would be back in a few minutes with our tickets."

Mal stands, taking Aster's arm. Together, they traverse the gangway and crawl through a splintered crack, toward the Extemporist safe house. "And so I waited. I curled up in the bushes, against the wall. I was exhausted. We'd been walking for an hour or more, climbing up through the midcity, through smuggling routes and up maintenance corridors. It was the first time I'd ever been in the overcity. It was the first time I'd seen the moon overhead. Not under my feet, where it belonged. I had no idea where we were. At least not until I inherited the place.

"To be honest, I didn't expect him to come back. He had spent his whole life appeasing me, telling me stories." His chuckle resonates in the dark. "Half the things he said, he didn't mean, and the other half he didn't mean to say. And even then, he was always half kidding."

"But he came back for you," Aster says.

"He tried." A sad breath spills from Mallory's lips. "When I heard him coming, I was so elated. The happiest I'd ever been. And the most terrified. I couldn't see anything through all the leaves, so I pressed myself to the ground and watched from underneath. I still couldn't see much—just enough to make out the look on his face as he ran. I expected triumph. He always got this look, this certain look when he got away with something, striking a deal with Three, or lifting something good from a drawer on a job somewhere. Instead … I can't really describe the face he wore. Horrified, hurt. Resigned. He knew exactly where I was and he looked like he was about to rush past it. He wasn't running to me. He was running from someone.

"I was too scared—or too smart—to jump out to help him. Maybe I should've. He was limping so badly. Maybe I would've been able to drag him into the brush, back down the gutter into the midcity, then all the way to the docks. But as it was, the Tender Guard caught up. They threw him to the ground just a few strides away from me. I backed up to the wall, still crouched—I saw him hit the ground. Someone knelt on him, slammed his cheek to the pavement. The way they pinned him, he looked right at me. He was so close I could see the blood between his teeth. I could've touched him. I would've, if I'd known I would never be able to again." Mallory pauses, helping Aster through a narrow passage. A million tiny legs skitter in the dark around them, but she doesn't flinch. "They pulled him to his knees, and I couldn't see him after that. I couldn't see what they did to him, but I could hear it. I'd never heard him … cry out like that before. Beg like that. Then, he went quiet. I thought they had killed him.

"There was a voice. Someone talking to him. I couldn't make out the words, but I knew it was Dawn. I thought he had come to help us, but the way he spoke was … too calm. So cold it burned my skin—I could feel it on my skin, Aster. He was furious. I'd seen him angry, but never like this.

"Of course he knew I was there. He walked up and down the street, honing in on the hedges like he could smell me. He called for me, told me it was all right, that I could come out. When I didn't, he said something to my brother. Then they were both calling me. Every name I had. Tyro, grub, princeling. Everything but Mallory." He pauses, emotion tightening his throat. "I almost crawled out. I wanted so badly to run to them, to either of them—to throw myself into their arms and cry. Maybe things would go back to normal if I did. Maybe I'd finally wake up. I'd wake up beside them in the barracks again, everything forgiven. But I didn't move. For once in my life, I listened to my brother."

"Good," Aster breathes. "That's what saved you."

"Saved me?" He laughs, leading her up a fungal staircase. "Vralen, nothing saved me. It didn't matter what I did. When Dawn got tired of looking for me, he just sprayed the bushes. Nothing much. A little vitriol and pepperberry. Just enough to make me cough." His brow furrows, red threads bristling at the edge of his bare scab. "Took him five minutes to pull back the leaves and find me. He stared for the longest time, saying nothing. There was a … I don't know, a soft look to him. A sad look. And for a moment I thought he'd let me go. I really did. But you know him. He's a Borischman at heart. He doesn't leave a job unfinished."

★ ★ ★

Guy wakes, piece by piece, body a patchwork of pains. His fingers are numb, his ankle a knot of throbbing heat, each breath a knife jabbed through his rib. When he opens his eyes, he's not sure what to expect. The darkness of a dungeon, the knotty wood of his old apartment, the starlit oil cherubs of the bishop's bedchamber. Instead, he sees clouds streaked in pink sunrise, wispy as Rebau brushwork. When he recognizes the murmuring engine under him, the feel of a wooden deck on his back, he knows he's made it. For a moment he's not Guy at all, but Eir Emmory vant Passand. He smiles, cracking the blood on his lips, and shapes Mallory's name. He is too weak to say it.

"God, Max. What did you do to him? He looks like shit."

He can't move his arms, but he turns his head, and somehow his torso manages to follow. Painfully, he rolls to his side. An arc of ornate wood rises over him—and beyond it, a gold handrail, then a silver strip of water, winding all the way to Tiliard in the distance. It is no bigger than his fist, and the sight of it steals his breath. He is farther south than he's ever been, rumbling through the liquid potter's fields of the Catoptric, where a body can disappear without a ripple and without a trace.

"You know, I thought I might have to head you off. I waited hours for you."

He moves his swollen eyes along the bow, and finds he is trapped in this bizarre dream with Bertram. He leans against the guardrail, sorting through the contents of the bishop's dressing table. "When you didn't show at the docks, I thought you'd given me the slip. That I'd have to catch you downstream. I haggled for this creaking old liner to do just that—only one I could get on such short notice. But it's decent, isn't it? Came with a nice little bar, fully stocked. So I mix myself a tonic and ready to set sail. Then I get a call. Lo and behold, you're still upstairs, stealing from the collection basket." He slips a ring onto his finger. "Decent haul, Moulène. Not enough to pay me back for the boat, unfortunately. Next time you rob God, don't half-ass it."

Guy groans, runs his tongue along a loosened tooth. His mouth tastes of iron. "Where…" he moans, and can't finish.

"Really outdid yourself, Guylag," Bertram continues. "Our teratopod—shit, what a mess." He pockets the rest of the bishop's jewels. Eyes bright with devastation, he steps toward Guy. "What did you think you were *doing*? Were you trying to kill it? You fucking fool—you thought it would die? You thought we couldn't salvage it, make it molt again? You thought you could *stop this*?"

A polished shoe meets Guy's ribs. He gasps, brain throbbing in his battered skull. He attempts to reach out for the Tender Guard standing beside him, but finds his hands are bound.

"Dawn…" he moans. "Please. Dawn."

"You want *Dawn* to help you?" Bertram laughs. "That man has already taken a bullet for you. Several, in fact. Some you shot yourself. Oh, no, don't look *betrayed.*" He kneels, twisting Guy's scarred ear, forcing his face upward. "Were it not for him, I would've already skinned you like a sewer fox. He's promised anything to keep you alive. Things you wouldn't *believe,* Guy. And he, unlike you, is a man of his word. He has a fucking spine." Bertram lowers his voice, leaning into Guy's ear. "You're lucky that you've got a love like his in your life. The poor man never saw *Larbella.* He doesn't know only tragedy can come from falling for a whore."

The mist-light shifts, and Mallory materializes by the handrail, flanked by Tender Guard, intact but for a terrified, broken look. Guy's heart drops. "Please…" he moans.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Bertram releases his ear. "Don't you dare beg, Guylag. Don't you *dare.* You're getting off so easy. So *fucking* easy, considering what you did. You destroyed the factory. Hundreds of thousands, *millions* in damage. And my nephew. My poor boy. The most precious thing in my life. You have no idea what that man was worth to me."

Guy tries to struggle upward, only to be pulled by pinioned arms back to his knees. "I'll pay," he moans. "Whatever you want."

"No doubt about that," Bertram snarls.

"The damage—whatever debts—all of it—"

"Yes, I know. I was—"

"I'll *pay*—"

"God. Can someone gag him please? Thank you, Rickhardt. There, listen. *Listen* to me, Guylag. Listen to what you did to my nephew. Do you know what we had to do? We had to *collect him.* Those poor kids in there—had to pick up all the little bits of him that were still crawling around the lab. You really traumatized them." His voice breaks. "God. What a way to go. What a way to fucking go. It sickens me. I adored him. I practically raised him. I invested so much into him. And now—now I don't even have a body to mourn." He takes a breath, straightens, solemn and purposeful. "You can't understand, Guylag. You just can't understand what it's like."

When Bertram turns toward Mallory, Guy begins to scream. Only a muffled, helpless sound spills through his gag as the man approaches the child, offering his hand.

"I'm sorry, kid," Bertram says. "We have to take your brother away for a while."

"No," Mallory answers, eyes wet with tears. "You can't. Dawn, don't let them."

"There, my dear," Bertram sighs. A pleasant scent spills across the deck as he speaks. "It's rough, I know. You love your brother very much. He loves you too. That's why he doesn't want you all tangled up in his business."

Guy struggles, begging wordlessly through the dried blood in his nose. He can't breathe, but he still howls into his gag.

"*Dawn,*" Mallory sobs, eyes darting from Bertram to Guy and back. "Don't let them—don't hurt him—"

Guy strains forward, but the grip over his arms only tightens. Dawn's breath is cold at his ear. "Don't, Guy."

"Oh, darling," Bertram says. "It's hard to understand. Your brother's done a terrible thing." He takes Mallory's hand in his own. "A really awful thing."

Guy twists in Dawn's unbreakable grip, slamming his elbow into his gut, his head into his shoulder, but it brings him no closer to his sibling. Choking on his own sobs, blind and thrashing, he doesn't see Bertram's arm straighten, doesn't see the way he rests a gentle but firm hand on the child's back. For a fraction of a second, Guy blinks away his tears, and then Mallory is gone.

There is no sound but the creak of the handrail, a breathy little gasp. No splash, no scream. Just an object disappearing into water as smoothly as through light.

Something snaps, but Guy can't tell if it's within him or without.

He kicks, writhes, and Dawn's grip relents. He stumbles toward the river, slamming his hips into the rail. He scans the surface; no ripple, no foam, only the endless pink mirror of sky. He tries to throw one leg over, to toss himself in after Mallory, but he is pulled back onto the boat. His ear pounds, thick with sound and blood. Vomit burns up his throat, into his gag, up through his nose.

"There. You see now." Bertram's voice is soft. His empty hand hovers over the guardrail, too steady. "I'm glad you see. Empathy is essential for a playwright."

★ ★ ★

"On the way down, I had a lot of time to think," Mallory says. "The fall wasn't far, but time, you know—time is as malleable as clay. It protracted, as it does. I kept thinking, as I fell—thinking about the things Reames had told me. Those tidbits of bioalchemy, over and over in my head; a thousand of them, a thousand times over. About volatility, and impossibility, and the rules of Catoptric science—how each is only defined by the ways it can be broken. And I realized, when I hit the water, that I

would keep breathing. No matter what. So I breathed it in."

Aster wraps her arms around him. "What was it like?"

"It hurt." His skin smolders with rage. "It hurt so badly. And then it … stopped. I don't remember when. I don't know how long I was down there, unraveling. Dissolving. I don't remember much of anything at all—aside from the lights. Everywhere, endless. Always moving. No space between them, no time. No current, no bottom. Nothing."

"'So am I baptized in the blood of God,'" Aster hums. "'A vessel brimful of Void.'"

"Not quite like that," Mallory says. "Though Aufhocker does come pretty close in *Gentleman.* I don't know how he did it."

"They say he studied Vernhardtian alchemy when he was young," Aster says.

"I doubt that. But even Vernhardt didn't know the river. Not truly. No one knows the river. I don't, and I was down there. Under the water, I couldn't really … *know* anything. I couldn't think. The only thing I was aware of was that somehow, I survived."

"How?"

He shrugs. "Same reason you survived the Overture Skirmish, I guess. Same reason Corporal Flint survived Broken Horse. Some of us just have the resilience of vermin."

WHAT GOD FORGOT

Thirty miles south of Tiliard, a child's body is pulled from the river. The boatswain is the first to spy the corpse, and the slim smuggling vessel kills its sugar motors to drift alongside it. The wheels spin to a stop, dripping silver from their blades, and the crew lines up on the starboard gunwale. It is a rare event for a creature to emerge from the river, and usually indicative of something infinitely blessed or deeply cursed. It is unclear which category this one falls under.

The body is small, and fresh, dressed in frayed trousers and a shirt whose diluted stains are still recognizable as blood. A BGS tattoo tells the crew this is another bizarre casualty from upriver, a young soldier caught up in all that Revivalist business.

The crew's doctor is called (who is not a doctor but a cardiomancer parading as one), and he lays his bare thumb over the child's radial artery, over the tattoo, where he finds no pulse, but a remarkably strong will.

The captain considers throwing the child back into the water, but as it happens, the crew is shorthanded. An extra cabin boy is a small mouth to feed, so the child is cleaned, given a blanket, a meal, a name, and put to bed in a hidden cabin, between a crate of stolen perfumes and a stack of erotic ladies' magazines. At first, he is as useless as he is wordless; he shakes too badly to hold any rigging, and at night, he keeps the crew awake, tossing and sobbing relentlessly. But as the ship makes her way down to the fume wastes and back, unloading art and wine at stopovers, trawling for scrap metal in the viscous doldrums of the southern Catoptric, the boy steadily recovers. He begins to speak, but not much; he begins to work, but not well. By the time they dock in Dagdrun at the end of the month, the captain has already made plans to pawn him off.

He meets with a local vintner in his cabin, to whom he shows off the boy, remarking on the symmetry and slenderness of his feet, perfect for crushing the kind of airy vintage the region is famous for. He is of the age where the children are most productive and need the least supervision, so the vintner gladly offers a seasonal contract. Unfortunately, right before the captain can press the child's thumb to it, the local sheriff, who has received a notice from the nascent régime in Tiliard that smugglers have now been added to the *Borisch Manual* and may be summarily disposed of, seizes the docks.

The ship is raided, then sunk. A few of the crew die in the firefight, a few escape, the rest are captured. The cabin boy is among the unluckiest of these three groups; he is marched with the rest of his ilk to the orchards, where within the day the sheriff tries them, judges them, and hangs them. Times are lean; the ostler is deputized as executioner, the scraggly plum trees as gallows. The only priest available to say rites is a disgraced exile from the city, stripped of everything but his thumb name and a small villa at the edge of town.

One by one, the smugglers fall, first the captain, then the boatswain, then the rest of the crew. The cabin boy is near the end of the line, and when his turn comes to ascend the stool to the noose, the priest lets out a doleful moan.

As soon as Eir Davide Bateusse sees the boy's face, the familiar frown, the silky, curly hair, the glint in his honey-rich eyes, a crushing pain seizes his heart. He has never met this child, but Davide recognizes the furrow of his brow, the dirge he hums, almost humorously, as he ascends the stool. It is Faustech's march into hell, with all Hock's unique trills and flourishes.

"Eir Sheriff," the priest says. "Please. Not that one."

The sheriff hesitates. He is a practical man, reluctant to spare young offenders who have a rich life of crime ahead of them. But he is also a man who appreciates a little irony, and he can't resist the poor priest when he whispers his confession.

"I beg you, Eir Sheriff," says Bateusse. "That one is … is my son."

His compatriots howl and holler as the cabin boy is ushered away from the orchard, but they are shortly silenced. The child is spared the noose, but he doesn't escape justice completely. Thanks to the humble request of Eir Bateusse (and a gift to the township of Dagdrun of ninety thousand marks, the last of the bishop's fortune), he is instead sent to the reformatory of Mongfestun, where he will be punished, rehabilitated, and sculpted, over the next ten years, into a worthy gentleman-soldier.

The day he sets foot in the repurposed monastery, in fact the very hour he is deloused and examined by a mercifully indifferent reformatory nurse, Wherewithal, Inc., surrenders its holdings to BGS, and Bertram Gorslung sits for his first portrait. It is an early attempt at what will come to be known as Revivalism (but is still called, for desperate want of something better, Post-Neo-Repressionism). It is "passably decent," according to the *Rhizosphere,* an assessment Gorslung considers far worse than an insult. Immediately, the painting is burned, the artist's workshop is fumigated (as well as the *Rhizosphere* printing house), and the Chancellor's search for his perfect likeness begins.

★ ★ ★

The first years are, by far, the worst. Guy barely remembers the early days. He recalls no trial, no sentence, only hours of cold, miserable shock, the throb of his injuries, the blindfolds, the restraints, the shouting of the guards, blunt force, a heinous stench, a spray of freezing water. Then four walls, close as a coffin's, a cage of infinite dark.

The grief percolates slowly, over hours, days, weeks. It first throbs in his ear, then moves down his jaw, to his heart, forcing him to roll to one side, then the other, clutching his chest, clawing at the walls of his cell, two paces wide and three long. Deprived of the passage of time and a sense of place, he can do nothing but add his voice to the chorus of howls and moans spilling ceaselessly from the other cells.

Months pass.

The city changes above him. With the Sreckt factories destroyed and Reames's expertise taken to his grave, the Revival stutters—momentarily, but enough for the Ministry of Aesthetics to mount its last defense. A bloody year ensues, marked by ecdytoxic misfires and rapid cycles of increasingly destructive retaliation. Fortunately, by the time the violence reaches its peak, most of the city is already under the influence of the nascent Revivalist movement. Maximian Sorav, the newly named Marshal Revenant, deploys what is left of their weaponry with great strategic prudence, and Dr. Nichola Whyck takes up the mantle of company alchemist, then Surgeon General. Using the scraps Reames had left behind, she attempts to rehabilitate the teratopod, facilitates its next molt, and in the meantime squeezes as much ecdytoxin as she can from whatever sources she can, including the contaminated.

The first time Whyck visits Guy's cell, two Tender Guard come with her. They hold his wrists as she kneels beside him, inserts the needle through his eardrum, and pulls a few meager drops of silver fluid. The extraction doesn't relieve the pressure, only exacerbates his unique tinnitus. He thrashes, narratives curling in his ear, blasting their accompaniment in the deafening throb of a headache. His tongue writhes with verse. When he tries to scream, his voice comes out an even, beautiful tenor.

By the time the Grand Marshal deigns to visit him, dressed in his white panoply and armed with an experimental perfume of mayfly, the months have whittled him down to a splinter of a man, naked but for a blotchy patina of bruises.

"Help me" is all he can moan when the Marshal kneels to lay a hand on his sunken cheek.

"I'll get Dr. Whyck," Sorav replies, so gently, so kindly, it's all Guy can do not to spit in his face. "Whatever you need—I'll get it for you."

"Paper. I need paper, Dawn."

"My name is Maximian."

"I need fucking paper," Guy groans.

* * *

Eir Davide Bateusse follows the cabin boy to Mongfestun. For a few weeks at a time, and entirely for free, he offers his spiritual services to a monastery which hasn't seen a monk in a thousand years. After speaking to a dour man he takes either for a headmaster or a warden, he settles into the empty chaplain's quarters, conducting the mealtime rites and hearing the confessions of the valley's delinquents, from teenaged lordlings caught with a gram of third-eye exudate to the ruffians who murdered customs officials to smuggle it.

The first time he sits in the booth with his adopted cabin boy, he hopes for an explanation, a story he can piece together from a list of sins. But all he gets, after a half hour of prodding, is a name.

When he returns to his villa later that month, he lies beside his wife and rolls it on his tongue, trying to map it to a familiar face. Vant Passand. Mallory vant Passand. He has never heard the name in his life, but he repeats it in his sleep, then over the breakfast table, then over lunch. His wife, already harrowed by the forfeiture of their savings in service to a young, random stranger, forbids him from returning to Mongfestun.

"I think I'm dead," Mallory tells Davide during his next confession. "I've died."

"You're not dead, my son," replies Davide, who shortly comes to doubt himself when he learns the boy was pulled from the river and possesses no pulse but a whirring thrum. Even when whipped, say the disciplinary officers, he doesn't bleed so much as unravel. "Change is not death," the chaplain reassures him. "It's a constant rhythm. Expect waxing and waning and waxing again. These cycles are inevitable."

The same words that comfort so many seem only to upset Mallory, and when the boy breaks down, Davide takes him into his arms and rocks him in the stony light of the chapel. He rests his nose against his temple, and notices that he does, perhaps, smell a little like Hock.

The second time Davide returns to his villa, and the third, and the fourth, he tries to explain to his wife the uncanny familiarity of this criminal child, one he insists is deeper than skin, emerging in rare, crooked smiles, mannerisms, figures of speech, his encyclopedic but largely incorrect knowledge of the old operas. His wife will tell him he is only deluded by his

guilty conscience, and for a while, he believes her. Ultimately, he will prove himself too cowardly to confirm the relation between Mallory and Hock—it is a suspicion, and a certainty, that he will hold unspoken for the rest of his life.

The fifth time Davide returns to his villa, his wife is gone. He is less devastated than he expects. He is not blindsided by the abandonment, nor indignant, nor even sorry for himself, only miffed that she didn't do him the courtesy of trashing the place before she left.

★ ★ ★

A GENTLEMAN OF THE VOID

ACT I

Because the floor is damp, Guy presses the paper against the wall of his cell. The pen is a furtive gift from Maximian, a small relief in the cramped, endless dark. He can't see, but he measures his lines with the width of his thumb, scribbling dialogue and music he does not know how to notate but only describe in lavish detail. For days he works, until his shoulder aches, until his thoughts tangle, until the fury of his pen rips through the fibers. The words multiply under him, burgeoning like the cells on Dr. Whyck's agar plates, like the teratopod's captive flesh, like the Revivalist gardens springing up in the wake of ecdytoxic battles.

He composes with insane prolificacy, demanding more paper every time Maximian visits him. He demands candles, pens, a desk, a chair, a typewriter, a harpsichord. The Marshal's gifts fill his prison, first his tiny cell, then the next over, payments for an embrace, a conversation, a false profession of love or forgiveness. Tortured by the music, by the pounding of venom, he exorcises the stories rapidly, repeatedly, spilling his grief into verse, into deaths and resurrections, into wild retellings of Guylag and his squire, of Larbella, of Mallory—Mal, as a Valkyrie. Mal, as a vindictive alchemist with a handkerchief in his pocket, as a relentless torturer, as a stoic mercenary. Men are murdered under Guy's pen, damsels courted, banks robbed and monsters slain. Heels tap and blades clash with merciless beauty.

Libretti fill his cell, spilling through the bars, making their way from his hands into Maximian's, then the Chancellor's. The tales are clumsy, repetitive, unedited, and, to both Gorslung's despair and his unparalleled satisfaction, the best he has ever read. The verse, an untrained attempt at meter, misses the mark so much it breaks the constraints of traditional form and blossoms into pure, unfettered lyricism. What his composers can interpret of the music drives him to ecstatic tears.

"It's true," he breathes, astonished. "It's fucking true what they say about prison."

Despite whatever grudge he may bear toward his traitorous hireling, the Laurel Chancellor is, first and foremost, a steward of beauty. He gathers his editors, composers, and conductors, and prunes the madly written scripts. He walks down to the depths of the midcity and pries the name Olaf Aufhocker from his new dramaturge, which he attaches to a lengthy and binding contract. He shoves his prisoner's thumb to paper, and the productions are put on to great and lasting success. The reclusive composer-librettist takes the city by storm, and the facets of the movement's disparate visual, architectural, martial, and olfactory styles unify on the stage. The half-baked concept called Post-Neo-Repressionism comes to fruition, blooming into something utterly unique.

"There are so many treasures still to be found among those affected—no, *inspired* by the Revival," the Laurel Chancellor tells the *Arbuscle*. "Eir Aufhocker is unquestionably our greatest, and I am elated, absolutely humbled, to be his patron."

By his fifth year in prison, he is established as the Dramaturge Laureate, though he is not informed of this until Maximian mentions it to him offhand. In his sixth year, he earns a new bed, a downy luxury awarded for his most successful season yet. In his eighth, by far his least productive, he earns several beatings and a session with the thumbscrews. His tenth, Maximian goes out of his way, and behind the Chancellor's back, to release him for an hour, escorting him down to an empty xylem channel to watch a terrified soprano sing the aria that broke a thousand hearts the first night *Fleeting Lodestar* was performed.

"It didn't turn out as well as I had it in my head," Hock mutters.

★ ★ ★

To his captors in Mongfestun, Mallory proves more of a poltergeist than a prisoner. Evasive, aggressive, almost entirely nocturnal, the boy scratches himself constantly, picking at the soft creases of his wrists and elbows until his flesh comes away in long, fibrous threads.

He is a weird child, but he is also clever, more so to his detriment than benefit. He devises elaborate escape attempts, perfects his prickly comebacks, executes small acts of sabotage wherever he goes, but he also learns to read, to load a gun and parry a strike, to properly set a ten-course meal and properly eat it, to interrogate a prisoner and arrange a bouquet. He endures the lectures on etiquette, the whippings, the badminton games, the cruelty of his peers. He dries his eyes and whets his blade.

His only friend, besides the reformatory's volunteer chaplain (who is also, according to the rumors, his father), is a flamboyant arrival from Tiliard, the delinquent son of a usurer who, driven by a sudden onslaught of aesthetic madness,

destroyed every artwork in his parents' gallery.

"It was all Revivalist garbage anyway," Demetrius says, before launching on a tirade about the dismal state of dance in the city. "These people can't even use ecdytoxin right, and they *invented* the stuff. You should've seen what they've done to the architecture. To the *music*."

Mallory, though professing little interest in aesthetic mores, is drawn to Demetrius, rapt at his diatribes, his mocking impressions of the Laurel Chancellor and the Grand Marshal. He devours the magazines Demetrius has shipped in from the city, the newspapers, the photographs. He saves all articles concerning the Marshal Revenant, over which he obsesses, spending night after night looking them over, thrumming with hate, until he has to open a fingertip and pull out a long, torturous string. They squirm from him in blues and reds and greens, restless and hungry. If left alone, they will wander, so he sews them into his pillowcase, into the serviettes he is supposed to practice folding, driving his hatred into the helpless fabric with the satisfaction of an épée's touch. He stitches impulsive but elaborate landscapes, scenes from Tiliarder canon, patterns of almost Revivalist floridity, then watches them fray and die.

Demetrius is lovestruck by his work. "All he talks about at confession," chuckles the reformatory chaplain, "is you."

"He doesn't know me," Mallory replies, though he has already revealed many secret parts of himself to Dee, details he has not, and will never, share with Father Bateusse. He has already made plans to escape Mongfestun with the other boy, which have been modified, reworked, then abandoned a dozen times over (and none of which yet involve a flour sack).

His plots are further altered when Demetrius, bored out of his mind, petitions the chaplain, then the warden, that the boys be allowed to see country renditions of recent city performances, *Deep Canyon* and *Sons and Brothers* and informational playlets that circulate through the villages. Moved by the young man's lengthy, improvised speech about the civilizing power of theater, the warden defers to the request, though the chaplain does not attend. (Musical turmoil, he says, exacerbates his angina.) The first true work of Revivalism to make it to the countryside is an operetta called *Sins of Our Patrons,* about a seamstress who finds a lost prince in an oil drum. It is a weak facsimile of the original performance, staged in the reformatory cafeteria by a generous troupe of volunteers, and it is ruthlessly panned by every boy in attendance, most of all Demetrius.

"*Drivel,*" he spits. "Utter dogshit. Everything the Laureate writes is contrived as hell."

Mallory can't reply. He lowers his eyes, because he has wept through the whole performance, profusely and in utter silence. "What…" he dares to mutter, only well after the actors have been booed away and the tables dragged back into place. "What was the librettist's name again?"

★ ★ ★

As Olaf's prison expands, so does Maximian's. While the more violent works of the Revival wind down, and the battles take place less in the streets and more in the courts and opera boxes and dinner parties, the necessity of fumigants makes way for the necessity of perfume. The Sanitarium cultivates a ripe new crop for the ripe new age, populating the Chancellery with scent-makers and poets and spies. Sorav's advisors tell him he must similarly equip himself, insisting on the necessity of a brass band, a few reserve dancers, and above all, a perfumer. One is delivered to him from the Sanitarium, a young casualty of the Overture Skirmish. The day she turns fourteen, Sorav watches her press her thumb to his contract, a move that, when over the next decade she grows to be one of the most remarkable scent-makers in the city, Bertram will never quite forgive him for.

Gradually, the dust settles. Occasional pockets of dissent spring up, stragglers of Neo-Repressionism, or creatures of ecdytoxic runoff, and Maximian fumigates, massacres, clears out one nest of dissidents only to uncover another. As Marshal, he becomes familiar with the torment of a perpetually unfinished job. He sits in his office for hours on end, fielding interminable calls; he sits for tribunals, for executions, for his portrait, his striking eyes painted in Ostlerfell Blue. He sits to read his own exploits in papers and magazines, sorting hatefully through photographs of baritones playing him onstage.

He is the best Grand Marshal the city has ever seen. He is exactly as a Grand Marshal should be: dashing, competent, tough, ruthless or bloodless depending on necessity. He expresses the tenets of Revivalism in the sculpture of his own body, in his elegant and irresistible strategies. Bullets seem to pass right by him. Poison seems not to sicken him. He is so successful, so well-suited for life, that when in his fifth year of office he writes a solemn note and ingests enough tranquilizers to kill a team of horses, he only wakes up the next morning slightly better rested than usual.

After this, he adopts a protégé, a child from the Sanitarium steeped in ecdytoxin, hoping that naming a successor would set in motion an inevitable succession. He begins to sculpt this weapon of a boy, sharpening him until the day he is keen enough for a fatal cut. It is the only thing that seems worthwhile in his parade of tedium.

"Day after day," he complains to Aufhocker, sliding a cold beer across the table in his cell. "Picking away at the Exultant's old bullshit."

"'Woe,'" Hock mutters bitterly. "'Woe to the fool who thinks that by virtue of his sitting upon it, the throne itself will change.'"

Sorav is used to Hock's equivocations, his barbs, his terrible silences, but this quote irks him so badly he has the man strung up and lashed.

★ ★ ★

Five years after *Sins of Our Patrons* is performed in the cafeteria, five years after Mallory learns his brother is still alive, he realizes he will not survive graduation. Not for any misbehavior, nor for aiding in the escape of a classmate, but because, in accordance with some charity agreement between the Mongfestun administration and the Tiliard Poverty Mitigation Society, the Marshal Revenant will appear as the ceremony's honored guest. His presence, claims the warden, will encourage enlistment in the Palas Infantry and reduce recidivism. The prison chaplain vehemently disagrees and refuses to attend, citing his heart trouble—an excuse that Mallory doesn't have the luxury of sharing with him.

One by one, the transformed young men mount the stage, and Mallory is no exception. His hands tremble as he kneels to receive his saber, sure that Dawn will recognize him, if not by his face, then by the name vant Passand, which surely has been extracted from his brother by now. He will recognize his tattoo, at the very least, despite the powder he's used to conceal it.

But the Marshal is not Dawn at all. When he speaks, restless protégé at his side, he does so in a dreamy monotone, echoic as a shell. When he takes the boys' hands and congratulates them, his eyes are glazed with what Mal will come to recognize as mayfly perfume.

He reaches out for Maximian Sorav's decorated glove. (Max, *Max*—he can't help but think as he approaches—a poor name, a dog's name.) He bows his head, and Tyro's heart burns in his chest. The hand is as warm as it always has been, firm as when it had rested on the nape of Guylag's neck, or gripped Tyro's wrist on windy midnight trips to the lavatories. A surge of white-hot devastation overtakes Mallory, and the threads inside him resonate like harp strings.

"May you serve with grace," says Maximian.

It's all Mal can do not to weep, all he can do not to draw his school-issued saber and make an attempt at the Marshal right there. Every part of him longs to bite, to slither up that sleeve, but he knows he can't break his own skin yet, not until he finds Emmory. And so he hovers, tears in his eyes, Marshal's hand in his own, knowing he has time and obscurity on his side. The relief pours from him in a long, grateful sigh.

"Thank you," he whispers to Sorav. "Thank you so much, Eir Marshal."

"Of course, young man," he replies dully. "Next up."

★ ★ ★

When Mallory is released from Mongfestun, he does not go back to Tiliard immediately, but follows Eir Bateusse to his home in Dagdrun for a few months, readjusting to his freedom. He gets an odd job here and there, sells his swordsmanship, his tailorship. For a few years he dabbles again in smuggling, trawling the river for treasures and information, transporting racks of stolen wine, or accompanying caravans bulky with blue pigment from Ostlerfell to the lifeless waters of Sullen Head. He circles Tiliard several times, closer with each pass, never taking his eyes off it.

When he is twenty-five, on a run from the boiling southern wastes, he finally disembarks. He makes his way through the undercity, then the mid, then, shyly at first, the stump-face. His search for his brother is both easy and monstrously difficult. Emmory vant Passand is not hard to see, but impossible to find. Evidence of him is everywhere, ubiquitous, delocalized. Excerpts of his old lullabies pour from the radios, references to his stories appear in artworks and jokes, his favorite platitudes emerge from the lips of passersby. He is fully absorbed in Tiliard, embedded in its wood, and Mallory has no means to extricate him. He has no status, no money, no clues to his location. He can't afford a ticket to the opera, much less to bribe his way to the reclusive librettist.

But he is patient. He's good with a blade, better with a needle. He knows the undercity, knows a few of his street boys from Joyous Healing, now mercenaries and counterfeiters and wine-runners; he knows a fraction of what Reames knew about bioalchemy, which is a great deal more than most, and, after tunneling through the midcity and reuniting with his old friend, he comes to know the deep and seedy network of the upstart Demetrius Prophet.

What he doesn't know is that a hundred miles south, Davide Bateusse is writing him a letter. His adoptive father, prompted by his worsening shortness of breath and the intermittent but excruciating pain in his chest, has been getting his affairs in order. He has been cataloguing and categorizing his possessions and his sins, reliving the night that the Tender Guard came to his house, haunted by the memory of his wife's terrified face, the gunshots, the clouds of ecdytoxin that chased him down Rebirth, and the guilt that chased him all the way to Dagdrun. He writes everything, from his first encounter with Hock in the hospital ship to the night the young man died robbing his house.

He tucks his confession into his will, naming Mallory vant Passand as his heir. He bequeaths his entire life to the foundling: his villa, the ruins of the church property in Tiliard and all contained therein, his moral debt. When he is finished, he dons his

slippers and housecoat and pours himself a glass of wine. Before the wax seal dries, a great pressure lifts from the bishop's shoulders, and then asserts itself in his breast.

The next morning, when he does not show up to the market for his olives, the seller sends a girl to his house. He is found like many men his age, stiff and barefoot in his chair by the fireplace, a bottle of plum wine uncorked on the sideboard. The local doctor is notified, who opens him up on his dining table to find a thrombus white as the ancient moon, a pearlescent calcification of startling beauty, obstructing his left anterior descending artery.

★ ★ ★

A few months after Aufhocker turns thirty-eight, or at least as far as he can reckon in the timeless disorientation of prison, he hears the name Mallory vant Passand spoken aloud. After so many years dreaming of it, hearing it buried in his musical triplets, whispered in the shaking diminuendo of his harpsichord, he knows better than to believe it had come from the Marshal's mouth. But he clings to the almost palpable feel of it. He paces his cell and repeats it to himself, scratching at the soot mites in his beard, conjuring and discarding images of a young gentleman, of a little girl, of a princeling and a mercenary and a factory boy and all things in between. Every time he crawls into his bed, he tosses with questions, with desperate theories, with the name stuck, burning, on his tongue.

At some point, during neither night nor day but the eternal tedium of their lightless blending, he feels the mattress sag beside him. At first, he doesn't open his eyes, figuring it is only the Marshal in one of his moods, drunk or grieving or guilty. He expects a gentle hand to shake his shoulder, brush his cheek, promising a five-course meal or a golden pen for an hour of intimacy. But a familiar scent meets his nose, forcing his eyes open, and he bolts upright with a rush of dread.

The Chancellor sits at his side. His perfume clings to him like the stench of rot, but it is his complacent smile, the handsome parting of his beard, that truly curdles Olaf's blood.

"Is this eiderdown?" he asks pleasantly. "Very sweet of Max. He spoils you—no, don't get up. Take your time. You need rest. You've been working so hard."

"What have I done wrong?" Olaf whispers. "I told you, *Marriage* is finished. I'm not putting in the beheading."

"No, no. I wouldn't dream of it." Bertram stands, moving to the bookcase, running his hand along the spines and piled music. "We've settled for a few hangings. And, well, I've had quite a bit of the production rewritten. A few of my composers and lyricists got together and recycled some motifs from the first act. It turned out lovely. I think you'll like it. It's very different than the original *Marriage,* but you know, that's how editing goes."

"You're going to let me out?" A chill crawls up Olaf's spine. "Have I paid it all back?"

"No, not nearly—but you've come so far. You've suffered a long time, my friend. You deserve to see the fruits of your labor—or better fruits than those pathetic little shows the Marshal puts on for you. You deserve a real production." Bertram's smile is as genuine as it is cruel. "I suppose you'd like to see Tyro again."

PRISM STORM

The waxing light of Rut Moon eases piecemeal over the fronds and steeples of the city. Its fractured face flushes pink, casting a lustrous glow over the Opera's marquee as workers strike through the name of Demetrius Prophet and raise the understudy's in its place. It brightens the scandalized and delighted faces of passersby, who sow rumors all along the street. Whispers travel outward from the square, down the gash of Conundrum, across the curve of Nineteenth, all the way to the Sanitarium, to its highest, most luxurious cell, where Elspeth Schölin stands for her gown fitting. When she overhears the Seamstress Laureate mutter Demetrius's name, she strains her ear for details, for any mention of Mallory or Aster, of the Extemporist movement at large. Unsurprisingly, she gets nothing. Of course the gossips are tight-lipped; half the seamsters pinning her dress are Crypsis.

She turns on her marble dais, at once blanketed with silk and completely naked. The Seamstress Laureate directs her gaggle of tailors, pinning her gown to her waist, her hips, laying ribbons of silk over her shoulders. Though all Elspeth sees in the mirror are disembodied patches of her own goosebumped skin, the Laureate assures her the gown is stunning, its white so pure it casts an almost supernatural glow over the room. Devoid of snail shells or avant-garde embroidery, it blossoms as a Revivalist work should. White satin roses grow from her hips, white mums at her breast, white lilies in her headpiece. Vines woven fine as hosiery crawl down her legs, secured with anklets of ivory filigree. The Chancellor's perfumers kneel under the hem of her dress, testing out an olfactory philter of sleepbug and cantharidin. A veil of pale butterfly wings is draped over her face, then, when the Seamstress isn't satisfied, substituted with a gossamer web of the silver-milk spider.

"Oh, no," Elspeth mutters. "There's a louse caught in this dress."

"Vralen?" The Seamstress freezes. "Are you sure?"

"It's a pity," Elspeth replies. "I liked this one, too."

They strip the silk from her body, searching through the folds and petals for carousal lice, pulling the veil from her face, the shoes from her feet. They find nothing, but can't risk it. The gown is scrapped, the veil burned, and Elspeth is led away by a nurse for another bout of decontamination.

Seven floors below her, the corpse of Demetrius Prophet is delivered to the Sanitarium morgue. The Surgeon General wheels the body to her table, delighted by his lean symmetry, the beauty of his long nose, his dark hair. As she eviscerates him, she sets out to prove the Vrenecker platitude that any man is far more enchanting dead than alive.

Seventy floors below that, in the dank labyrinth of the midcity, the door to Olaf Aufhocker's cell slides open. He steps into the sap-sticky tunnels of the Strangleroot prison system, guards at his sides, and follows the Laurel Chancellor up the sloping corridor, toward a waiting car. As they approach the vehicle, a Tender Guardsman takes his wrists, pulling them behind his back.

"Oh, for God's sake," the Chancellor barks. "Don't *cuff* him, you animals. Do you even know who this is?" The officer drops Olaf's hands and instead opens the car door for him. "These Tender Guard, Hock. I'm telling you. Max lets them run wild. At least Autotomic had some discipline. Well, get in."

Olaf stares into the car while Gorslung slides in the other side. The smell of new leather wafts up from the seats.

"I said get in, Hock."

Finally, he musters the will to climb inside, flinching as the door slams shut. The engine rumbles, shedding a sweet smell, and the car begins the corkscrewed journey upward.

"God, you reek of sap," Bertram says. "And that beard. Dire need of a trim, my friend."

Olaf can't reply. He watches the green lamplight of the midcity ease past. A distant boom rattles the wood under the wheels, and the compass-chimes sing in response. A drone thrums in his ear, in his nose, instantly recognizable even attenuated through the years. The Marshal's ecdytoxin is sharp, refined, a far cry from the crude weaponry he had employed during the early months of the Revival. It is the smell of a movement in its maturity. He shivers, knowing that somewhere the teratopod still clings to life, a dragon not slain, but tamed.

"Where's Mallory?" he asks hoarsely.

"Well, you see, that's the problem." Another rumble shakes the compass-chimes. "Max is trying to flush out your little sister—or brother now, I suppose. I've run into him a few times. Unrecognizable, honestly. You know he's made quite a gentleman of himself."

"Has he?" Olaf croaks.

"Well, of a certain type. A real Caspian, I'd say. All brooding and mysterious and what have you. A couturier. Bit of a ladies' man. Even my bride was smitten with him, for a while."

Olaf takes a shaky breath. He doesn't know whether he can manage to laugh.

"She wanted him to design her wedding dress," Bertram continues. "The thing was a monstrosity, I'm afraid to say. We had to throw it out."

"Never could teach him to work a needle," Olaf says, because it's the only thing he can.

"Oh, but he's *popular,*" Bertram sighs. "Single-handedly brought embroidery back in. Everyone's got those handkerchiefs now. You know, the ones our grandfathers used to carry around. The topographical ones." Bertram pauses as they pull up to a gated checkpoint. "It pains me to say, Hock, but he's mixed himself up with some bad people. Your little grub has left quite a few corpses in his wake. The Marshal's son, foremost. Or the boy he hired to be his son."

"Florian," Hock breathes. "Oh, God."

"Evidently Mallory is good with a sword. Graduated Mongfestun, can you believe it? Spent a decade there. How he ever managed—well, that's a story we're both eager to hear, I bet."

A shiver runs up Olaf's spine. He glances to the Chancellor, to his soft smile, his arm draped over the back of the seat. "What are you going to do to him?" he asks.

"Nothing he doesn't make me," Bertram replies. "Oh, don't frown like that. I thought you'd be happy to hear the news."

Hock curls in his seat, resting his head between his knees.

"Come on," Bertram says. "Save the tears. This isn't a funeral—or it doesn't have to be."

Olaf only tightens his grip around his knees, straining to conjure an image of Mallory alive, of him emerging from the river, making it all the way to Dagdrun, all the way to the bishop's door, being taken in as a son of Davide Bateusse. What an utter fool Mallory must've grown into, to come all the way back to Tiliard, to throw himself into the monster's mouth for a brother that did nothing but fail him. Hock would like to think he had taught him better than that, but he knows his little sibling. Even as a toddler, Mal was fueled by righteous spite.

"You'll love the Chancellery, Hock," Bertram says. "I've completely remade the place. I'll give you a tour, and a suite. Get you some nice clothes. Wash off the soot mites—dear God, there are quite a few, aren't there?"

The throat of the midcity opens to a maw of sky. Sunlight spills through the windows, and Hock squints against it. As the Chancellor prattles on, he grips the car door, battling vertigo.

A terrifying city crawls by, lush, beautiful, the gold geometry of Neo-Repressionism warped and choked under Revivalist floridity. His stomach turns at the hugeness of it all, the unrelenting assault of color and sound and movement. Without the close proximity of stone walls, the grounding pressure of the dark, he feels himself falling upward, unmoored from gravity. He shakes, waiting for the car to rise from the street and sail into the infinite sky.

"I think I'm going to vomit," he says.

"Ah, poor man," Bertram sighs. "Well, hold it in until we get to the Chancellery. I'm not stopping for you."

★ ★ ★

"They fumigated the safe house above Joyous Healing this morning," the errander girl says. "This was the only thing they left." She extends an envelope toward Mallory, its crease fanned and bubbling with ecdytoxin. "It's for you."

Mallory holds the invitation in one hand and his scabbed forehead in the other. He reads it once in silence, then once aloud. A few stragglers from other safe houses stand nearby, listening to him recite the casting changes, the new choreography, the alterations to the Revival scenes, as well as alterations to the bride's dress. An understudy will be playing the role of Bertram Gorslung, since the principal has been, to the Chancellor's great surprise and regret, added to *The Borisch Manual of Catoptric Pest Species.* His cadaver, however, taxidermized in Revivalist style by the Surgeon General, will still play a prominent role in the celebrations, featured as the wedding buffet's centerpiece.

Mallory rests a hand over his eyes. Under his small, sorrowful sighs, Aster can make out a hint of laughter. "Fucking Dee," he mutters. "Always true to form. Won't let his own death upstage him."

Outside their hideout, a sticky but well-ventilated hole where Aster has set up her organ, gunfire patters through the streets. The hollow drum of the midcity echoes with ecdytoxic detonations, vibrating the tenements, tearing through smuggling routes, louder and closer with each hour. With two safe houses gone, it'll be a matter of days before the Palas closes in on the others, clearing out every Extemporist bolt-hole, gallery, bar, and café. The Chancellor's message is clear, and the Marshal's delivery is thorough. Mallory will come to this event, one way or another. He can go willingly, or he can wait for Sorav to smoke him out and drag him.

Aster rises from her organ, a slapdash setup of witchfruit, bilge musk, nightshade, and crushed threads pulled from Mallory's skin. "Are you all right, Mal?" she asks.

"Yeah. Things get a lot harder without Dee, though. He was the real headliner of the act." He taps his chin. He is accustomed to plotting, struggling, formulating and discarding his plans with the shifting winds. He has run with the Extemporists for a while now, and he knows Demetrius's death will not stop the droning hum of insurgent activity, only change its tune. Sudden, massive shifts in direction are common motifs in Extemporism. Losing the head will not stop the body. It is something many of them learned as victims of or witnesses to the Revival. Scripts curl and decay, they burn, they are lost. New heads grow. The dead rise. Extemporist strength lies in adjusting to the inconceivable.

"Are you going?" she asks, though she knows the answer already. The last time he tried to hide from BGS, to keep quiet and wait them out, it did not work for him. He has waited long enough.

"We'll see about the others," he says. "See who's feeling brave. But they're forcing my hand, personally." He unfolds a note tucked into the crease of the invitation. When he hands it to her, she recognizes the Marshal's rough, angular script. "My brother will be there."

Her throat tightens. The message is just as succinct as all Sorav's directives: *Olaf, Box 27. Wants to see you. Very much.*

"He might be lying to lure you in," she says. "He might string you up next to Demetrius as soon as you walk through those doors."

"He might. He might not. I have no idea. Doesn't matter. Alive or dead, I'm walking out of there with my brother." Mallory stands and dusts himself off. "I trust you, vralen. I trust your work. I've seen what you can do for the Marshal. You know how to compose a good fog of war." He tucks the note into his breast pocket. "And Dee always insisted that I learn to play things by ear."

★ ★ ★

Because of the extensive and unforeseen changes to *The Marriage of Bertram,* the dress rehearsals grow only more tedious. Bridesmaids smoke by the loading dock while half-costumed flower boys scurry through the wings. The understudy, a meticulous young man with half of Demetrius's good looks and a mere fraction of his talent, finishes his exercises under the micromanaging baton of the Chancellor. Gorslung paces the proscenium, caked in perfume and all the more horrid for it. Even from afar, or especially from afar, his olfactory projection seems off, exuding an aura of washed-up rot as he directs the director, conducts the conductor, finalizes the choreography, ensures everything is in its perfect place.

He sweeps his arm upstage, indicating where he wants Mallory to enter, funneled through a maze of backdrops by an escort of Tender Guard: past the gallows, where a gaggle of Extemporists will be hanging, then center stage, where he will be presented to Aufhocker. The spotlight will move to the eccentric composer-librettist in his box, beautifully groomed and dressed in BGS colors. A choice will be made—Mallory will renounce Extemporism, will be escorted up to the boxes and reunited with his brother, or he will join the bodies that will, by then, be veritably piling downstage. The bookmaker will open three hours before the performance and close at intermission. Justice, restorative or retributive, will only accentuate the triumph of the Chancellor's wedding.

"Teach them to say that Revivalism is dead," Gorslung growls.

The Marshal is busy with his own preparations. The Surgeon General has supplied him the season's ecdytoxin harvest for this event, every last drop squeezed from the teratopod's scarred and shriveled tongue, from its half-born progeny, and from contaminated captives in the deepest cells of Strangleroot.

Tender Guardsmen practice their dance, pacing the auditorium with their sidearms and tanks. A watchman here, a rifleman there, a few dozen Crypsis agents, dressed as guests and cast and ushers. Not so many as to scare off Mallory, but enough that no matter what hole he crawls in from, no matter what termite track or crack in the wall, he will be spotted. He is to be subdued on sight; orders are to place a glass of champagne in his hand and usher him to the dressing rooms.

Sorav rolls out the red carpet like flypaper. He orders windows to be left unlocked, entrances strategically unattended. Shift changes are frequent and schedules leaked, ensuring security lapses will slip into Extemporist hands. Most importantly, he spreads the word that Olaf Aufhocker, for the first time in his career, will attend a performance of his own work.

The response from the city is immediate, and overwhelming. The ticket office fields frantic calls, offers of tens of thousands of marks to outbid the Chancellor's invited guests, offers of precious artworks, of properties, hirelings, family heirlooms and family heirs. (Gorslung, ever the savvy businessman, accepts a few of the better deals, muttering gleefully to his Minister of Finance even as he paces backstage.) It will be jovial chaos, and the kind that Mallory should know will work to his advantage. Sorav hopes it will be enough to entice him, that he will know this is the best, and only, opportunity he will ever have to see his brother again. And if Sorav knows Mallory—or if he had at least known Tyro—he will not let this chance pass him by.

He looks forward to it. Down below the shame, the rage, some shriveled part of him truly misses that little grub.

"I imagine he'll try to come in from above," he says as he enters Aufhocker's box. "You know Tyro. Always crawling

through the passages over the barracks."

Olaf observes the stage in silence. He too has been costumed and blocked for the rehearsal, placed where the technicians in the catwalks can swing the spotlight toward him. Despite the best efforts of the Seamstress Laureate, his silk shirt hangs off his bony shoulders, his sleeves seem too wide for his wrists. Occasionally, he folds back his cuff to scratch at his burning tattoo. With a touch of subtle perfume, with his trimmed beard and formalwear, he looks like a corpse about to sail off into the Catoptric.

Sorav's heart wilts. "You look good, Hock," he says.

Aufhocker returns his eyes to the stage, where the understudy and a flower girl circle one another on a wooden riverboat. He reaches after her as she climbs the balustrade in her white frock, dressed as if for a funeral. A noble death for a noble child, a misguided little girl, so terrified of the Revival she would leap into the Catoptric to avoid it. Despite the understudy's efforts to sing her down, she climbs, and climbs; when she flops into the pad behind the riverboat, the dancer spins and falls to one knee.

Olaf watches the display, saying nothing for a long time. Then, barely a whisper: "I didn't fucking write this."

Sorav lays a hand on his back, and he flinches at the spark of bloodwort. The Marshal withdraws. He has eschewed mayfly, wearing only the scents that sharpen edges and eyes; keen, cold armor, skillfully made but still, to his nose, pedestrian. Aster would've made him the perfect perfume, something gloriously menacing but still soft, a kind of protective ferocity that Olaf would not shrink from. Unfortunately, the Chancellery has no spares that can come close to replacing her.

Sorav wonders if she will come with Mallory, as a hostage or an accomplice. Maybe she's already dead, taken by her lungs or flayed by the Extemporists. She may be perfectly fine, dissuaded from attending by Mallory's chivalric drivel: *It's not safe, I can't afford to lose you*—no, Tyro would gag. Even breathless without medicine, helpless without access to her solarium, as long as Aster can stand on her own two pumps, she will come for Elspeth. She will follow her old friend into whatever danger, whatever madness awaits, real or contrived, genuine or self-imposed. She is enamored, addicted to Elspeth's lovely poison. She may not recognize it, but Dawn can.

"Would you like some wine?" Sorav asks with what he hopes is a pleasant tone. He can't manipulate his perfume with his tongue like the Chancellor, but for Hock, he tries to put forward softness, that faint touch of linnetwood Aster always described as brotherly. "This may go on for some time. It's easier with a little sweet red."

Olaf says nothing, only picks at his tattoo.

While Sorav summons an usher and orders a bottle of Weingut Marseea, he watches the understudy help the flower girl up to the riverboat for one last leap before lunch. Then, he raises a hand to his forehead, leans against the table, over the dice columns and floral centerpiece, and releases a quiet moan. There is a distinctly musical flavor to it, a kind of lush melancholy characteristic of his works.

"Not again," he rasps. "I can't watch it again."

"Watch what?"

"What do you fucking think?"

"You don't need to. We're offering him a choice. An easy way out."

"For *what*? Mallory did nothing."

"He kidnapped my perfumer. Manipulated her. He killed Florian, Hock. They aren't hirelings to me. They're my children." Sorav's scent flares. "He couldn't hurt me, and so he went for them instead. They had nothing to do with this."

His heart twists at Olaf's bitter laugh. "Neither did Tyro. Tyro did nothing. And you just let Gorslung—"

"I kept you alive."

"*Alive,*" he spits. "Fuck you. I should step off this balcony now. Save poor Mal the trouble."

"Don't kill yourself just to spite me, Hock. It'll only excite the gossips."

Olaf rests his face in his hands. "He won't come, anyway. He knows better. He knows you're just going to kill him."

"If only Bertram were that practical," Sorav sighs. "The last Chancellor would've had the Exultant shoot him out back before the show even started. But that's Revivalism for you." The usher girl returns with the wine, setting two glasses on two small, embroidered coasters. "If he dies at this show, it'll be his choice."

A technician crosses the stage, checklist in hand. A choreographer appears at the vomitorium with Elspeth, helping her count her steps down the aisle, up to the stage, to the trellis and the lunar bishop who will adorn her. Dressed in a gown of gorgeous white, restrained by silk and scents all the way to her ankles, she hobbles toward her marriage in small, unsteady steps. Before she can make it to the stage, a half dozen Extemporists are led in from the wings and marched up the gallows. They are heavier than the pigskin dummies; when the tech cranks the lever and the bodies fall, the beam creaks and bends. They sway, suspended for a few seconds, then a sharp crack rings through the venue.

"I've been wondering," Sorav says, "where the name Mallory vant Passand is from. Some obscure Porrain or something?"

Olaf doesn't take his head from his hands. A pyrotechnician hollers from somewhere offstage, and a trail of smoke slithers

in from the wing.

"Hock?"

Finally, he lifts his face. "From our grandfather. Malfried."

"So it really is vant Passand, then. And yours, too?"

He nods.

"All these years," Sorav says. "All your works. You've never put your name on anything."

"Why would I? It's the only real thing I have left."

Sorav sets down his wine. He glances at the coaster through the tinted glass, at the blue-and-green stem-stitching. It looks nothing like Mallory's, but he still takes it in a gloved hand and tosses it over the balustrade.

★ ★ ★

The thunder of artillery rumbles through the midcity. The sound vibrates down through the roots, carrying the scent of fumigants, and the barest trace of the Marshal's perfume. Cinnamon and bloodwort. A hint of kinderflower.

In the safety of the damp stele, Aster rolls out her enfleurage. The firefly lamps flicker with the thunder of Sorav's relentless search, but she is so swept up in her work, she hardly notices. She squints through the dim light, then, when the power lines sputter out, she navigates her bottles and decanters by smell alone. Devoid of her glass columns and thermometers, she makes do with beetle exudates as carrier oils, with cigarette embers for heat. Her organ is less of a perfumer's station than a sorcerer's, peppered with bits and pieces of a dozen arts, from the old hedge witches to the Vernhardtian alchemists. As Mallory stands guard, receiving the onslaught of grime-faced erranders, listening to their messages from other Extemporist hideouts and sending off his responses, Aster plies her craft.

She lays out threads of his flesh, pulled from his injuries before they can heal—red, angry skeins from his arm and forehead, a shimmering green from the bites she leaves on his lips and earlobes, and bitter ink-black from the inside of his wrist, under his tattoo. She pulls them from every part of him, drawing out every hurt, every joy, every desire and disappointment, and murders them under her pestle. She crushes each of them, stretching their remains over a bath of boiling hellrat lymph. As they process, a thousand tiny corpses with a thousand unique fragrances of decay, they release a hot, sharp vapor.

"What the fuck am I doing," she breathes, hands soaked in burning oils. She is used to working with pure ecdytoxin, not a substance that violently negates it. "This is disgusting."

"I imagine the inventors of paint said the same thing," Mal says, hugging her shoulders. He has likewise been working in the dark, aided only by fireflies or a flickering exterminator's torch. When he hands her squares of embroidery, tangled little knots or the soft weave of his cravat, she soaks the living threads in the effluvium of the dead, compounding their hunger, their anger, their volatility. They wallow in the heat, exuding their hungry allomones, until they are ready to be pulled tight around a wearer, ready to burst open or snap shut, frayed fibers poised like teeth for the spark of ecdytoxin.

At night, when the scented rumbling of the Marshal's hunt dies down, Aster and Mal squeeze into a mossy knot and curl around one another. The scent of their work burns Aster's breath, and she buries her face in Mallory's collar, staving off a wheeze with the weave of his threads. She runs her hand across his chest, feeling the invitation tucked into his pocket. A dozen more have rained down on them since, little temptations and taunts delivered by the Extemporists' dauntless erranders. Some are addressed to Aster: summonses from the Marshal, or courteous pleas bearing Elspeth's forced signature.

"As if they need to," she whispers in the dark.

Mallory pulls her close. "Let's hope they don't start sending us severed thumbs, like in *Bast Street*."

"Did that happen in *Bast Street*?"

"In my brother's version, it did." He falls silent for a little while, listening to the scratch of insects scuttling through the tubules above them. "I can't imagine him, vralen. I'm older than he was when I last saw him. When I think of him, I think of him as he was. Like he's my younger brother. And I know he still thinks of me as a child." He pauses. "I'm afraid … he won't recognize me."

"He will," Aster says. "He'll know you by your smell. The whole city will." She opens her mouth over his, breathing in his bitterness, his heat. Gently, she rolls his lower lip between her teeth. Under his thin skin, her tongue follows the movement of his threads.

"Do you need more?" he whispers. "You might not see me again, vralen. If I live, or die, I'm gone either way. So ask now."

"No," she answers. "It's already quite … well, this won't be something you can wear. At least not more than once. Not something you can bottle, or control." She pauses, a buzz of anxious pleasure traveling from her lips to her heart. "El will love it."

"I know she will."

"Mal … when this is over—" She stops herself when she realizes she's not sure what she means by *over,* or, for that matter,

this. "You and Aufhocker…"

"Don't worry about us. I have a boat waiting."

"You really think you can do it?" she mutters. "You think you can give Tiliard the slip?"

"What I think doesn't matter. I'll still try."

"No one makes a clean break, Mal. The city's roots span the whole valley."

"I'll leave the valley, then."

She laughs, imagining him sailing to the ends of the Catoptric, scouring the boiling doldrums for its mouth, a passage into the acid sea; she imagines him standing proud atop his disintegrating ship with a tricorn hat. Or, better, a cap of hellrat fur, dragging his hapless brother over the Sawteeth and into the fume wastes, leaping over peaks so sharp they can sever a bird from its wings. Maybe he will instead don a sun hat and climb west into the high deserts, the endless maze of manzanitas and the necrotizing fungus that proliferates there.

"Well, wherever you go," she sighs eventually. "If you survive, be sure to write."

THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

On the night of the Chancellor's wedding, when the Palas's clock tower strikes four, a swarm gathers in Conundrum Square. Three hours before curtain, the bookmaker opens, the golden doors swing wide, and the foyer floods with guests. A harpist on the mezzanine coaxes in the throng with Aufhocker's greatest hits; commissionaires weave between coattails while Crypsis and Tender Guard stalk the perimeter, sidearms and canisters ready. Outside the fortress of stone and glass and music, Extemporists lay a soft siege to its walls, setting up their bizarre installations in the alleyways or infiltrating the queues of invitees. Photographers capture them as they are captured, snapping pictures of the arrests while guests watch from the windows and balconies.

Inside, carapace-studded shawls and lizardskin gowns glint blue and green and yellow, multiplied in the glass rims of champagne flutes. The halls glow with ecdytoxin. Ministers adorn themselves in their most sinister perfumes; Tender Guard march with it sloshing in their tanks. Conversation rises on an effluvium of kilterwort and myrrh: comments on the beauty of the ceremony, the lyricism of the vows Aufhocker has written for the couple, the extravagant typeface on the playbill. Threaded in the congratulations and laughter and false praise, a giddy net of rumors interlaces, knots, and tightens.

Gleeful whispers proliferate about the Chancellor and his strange stench, his struggle to pull off his own perfumes after the upset of *The Lilies,* about his bride, and her eyes, yes, in bad shape—*very* bad shape, as evinced by her unfinished portrait, by her recent confinement in the Sanitarium. Sons of the martial classes start up about the death of the Impaler of the Tender Guard, merchants speak of the downturn in the quality of pigments, artists and critics chirp sotto voce about the decline of Revivalism. A few upstarts dare to whisper of their own plans, would-be Chancellors exchanging fantasies of Cabinet picks, their thoughts on the recent fumigations, or if there really is something to this whole Extemporism business. The Secretary of Internal Reform, immovable and crusty as ever, raises his usual cigar to his lips and quotes his usual Vrenecker platitude, something about the ever-changing nature of constancy. In the gentlemen's lavatory, Eir Franz Sreckt meets with the Sommelier Laureate to deliver the poison that will go into the Chancellor's wine at the reception. He has a good feeling about tonight, and he has been waiting a long time to avenge his brother Hans.

The crowd mills about the massive punch fountain, where Demetrius's carapace is preserved in dynamic contrapposto. He is dressed in the regalia of Thomas the Younger, rapier in one hand, the other lifting an ombré macaron tower. The guests pick his tray clean as they admire his sleek hair, the perfection of his eyes, ivory and scarab-shell, the expertise with which he has been cleaned and pinned, so lifelike with his handsome smile. Some patrons leave a few of their own offerings to the fallen traitor: a rose here and there, a libation, and in one case, a red pocket square tucked into his blouse.

The gift appears harmless at first, violent only in how badly it clashes with his tasteful color scheme. Then, a single thread loosens at its corner. A few minutes later, another squirms free. By the time the first bell rings and the crowd files into the bar and the orchestra and the balconies, half the weave has come apart, swaying hungrily in the scented draft of each passerby.

Only the impresario notices the odd little kerchief. A man with an eye as impeccable as his ear, he catches a glimpse of it while overseeing the changing of the macaron tower. As ushers bustle around him, setting out the chairs for the reception banquet, he squints at the pocket square, assessing its frayed edges, its haphazard stitching, and judges it a piece of poor quality, unworthy of the centerpiece.

He clicks his tongue. "These dilettantes," he mutters to a passing usher. "They think anything they make is good enough to share."

The impresario reaches for the square. As he pinches the corner, a strange smell curls up from the fabric. A little smoke, a little rot. He wrinkles his nose and pulls at it; it resists for a fraction of a second, then comes apart in his hand. Knots of string unravel, spilling almost liquidly across his palm. He blinks, rolls a few of the threads between his fingers, then glances back to the remainder of the square, still stuck behind the crest of Demetrius's pocket. The impresario reaches in and digs around with his glove, and when the rest of the kerchief refuses to come loose, he bids an usher bring him a stool. He mounts the dais, spreads open the pocket, and peers inside.

A braid of red thread curls at the lowest corner of the square. The impresario pulls at it, stripping more and more fibers free, but it seems to have tunneled through the weave of Demetrius's blouse—and, he realizes after a few more tugs, his flesh. A shiver runs up his spine, and it dawns on him that a piece so strange, so ugly, could be nothing but a work of Extemporism.

"Get the Tender Guard," he tells an usher girl. "Tell them something got past security."

She nods and skitters away. Remnants of the square bunched in his glove, the impresario steps down from the dais. When he glances back up to Demetrius, he releases a gasp of cold shock.

The dancer's smile is moving. It widens, stretching his parted lips as strings wriggle from between his teeth. That strange smell, stronger this time, billows from his mouth like breath. The air heats, roils, and as the impresario stumbles back, he feels something move in his palm. He glances down—a hundred long, loose threads slither up his wrist, swarming the spot where his perfumer applied the barest spritz of ecdytoxin. He claws at them, but the threads flail up his sleeve, sparking, negating, devouring.

Just as a Crypsis agent spies a young man with embroidered cuffs slip through the galleries, toward the boxes, a scream echoes in the foyer. Spectators glance over their shoulders, gasping or grinning at the prospect of another attack. A few of the braver attendees, sure that the ruckus means there has been a sighting of Aufhocker, rush down the stairs from the mezzanine, ardent fans and bad actors alike.

Of course, the Dramaturge Laureate is already safe in his box, Grand Marshal at his side. He has been pacing his little booth for the past hour, getting increasingly, miserably drunk. He has tried his best in the last few days to avoid the dull ache of sobriety, shuffled at gunpoint from his suites in the Chancellery to the bathhouse to the dressing rooms, trimmed and shaved and sculpted and fitted to perfection.

"Look at you," Bertram had cooed when he exposed Olaf to his own reflection for the first time in the better part of two decades. "Handsome as the Poet-King."

If his years in the dark have been kind to his face, they have not been kind to his senses. After so long in his cramped cell, even the house lights are too bright for him. The champagne is too rich, his perfume too heavy. He flinches at every distant patter of gunfire. His stomach turns every time someone ducks in to inform the Marshal of a new development. He still can't quite contend with the hugeness of the Opera, the vast maw opening over him, its tongue the lush proscenium, its teeth the chipped glass of the chandeliers. Dizzy, overexposed, he feels very much like the cockroach from that old Porrain play, who wakes in horror to find itself a man. Stripped of a shell and tormented by sentience and all its contradictions, agonies, and perversions, it tries to escape humanhood by squeezing under a wardrobe, fatally crushing itself.

Hock has no such escape. With two Tender Guard at the door and Sorav resting a hand over the back of his chair, he has no retreat but into himself, into a maze of memory. Over and over he tries to vault the quarter of a century that separates him from the Opera, at once so familiar and so foreign. A thick veneer of Revivalism coats every surface of the place, but under the ecdytoxic statuary budding from the walls, under the new curtains and the haze of perfumes, it holds its familiar shape. Beneath Hock's fingers lie decades of wine stains, the ashen gray burns from stubbed cigars. To his right, hidden among the cornices, sits the gargoyle he had perched on to watch the puppeteers assemble Saint Guylag's dragon. To his left are the indelible black scorch marks from the Great Fire of 1159, streaking along the beams to meet the equally indelible yellow scorch marks from the Great Fire of 1480. Straight ahead, the bricked-in patch above the backdrop where Grand Marshal Nathaniel Thwart crashed in his doomed aircraft, maiden voyage cut short in an explosion of leafy propellers.

He had sometimes dreamed of bringing Mallory here, of showing off his old hiding places, dressing him in a lavender suit and watching his face light up at the overture to *Little Orphan Clevette.* Not even in his boldest fantasies had he put his brother onstage, much less trapped in a bastardization of his own script. As he washes back the last drops in his flute, he realizes this torturous production will be the first he'll ever see properly, from beginning to end.

"Would you like another glass, Olaf?" the Marshal asks. He steps up to the balustrade, where he watches the crowd file in, packing the space so tightly their perfumes spark against one another. A few captive Extemporists are led through the throng, wailing about revenge or justice or some other fleeting abstraction. "Artless hacks," Sorav sighs.

Hock says nothing. As he returns to his dismal, overwhelmed body, he realizes a hundred rehearsals could do nothing to prepare him for what is about to happen.

"You know," Max continues as an usher pries Olaf's glass from his hand. "No one's really here for the show. They're not here for Bertram. They're here for you. Half of them are scanning the boxes for you."

Finally, Hock brings himself to speak. "How do they know what I look like?"

"There are a few pictures from the early Revival. Pictures of us together. You with your pen and notebook, like one of those political librettists."

An urgent knocking draws Sorav's attention to the door. He turns as a Tender Guardsman enters and mutters something in his ear. A dark shadow appears between his brows.

"Stay here," he tells the Guardsman. "Make sure he doesn't leave. Give him anything he needs, anything he wants. No one comes in or out but me." He moves to the door, striking in his white tuxedo. "I think your brother's arrived."

"He just—walked in?" Olaf's heart hiccups. "Did they just let him in?"

"Why wouldn't they? He was invited." Maximian glances back at Hock, an uncanny sharpness to his gaze. "Here. Let me fix your cravat. Bertram will want you looking your best for this."

★ ★ ★

Mallory blends in with the thinning crowd, but not well enough. The Marshal can readily spot him from his position in the galleries. His embroidered cuffs poke out from under the sleeves of his dark overcoat, and his curls spill from the brim of his hat. Without the haze of mayfly, Maximian can make out the shape of Tyro in the curve of his jaw, and in his long, angry stride.

"He came up from Sigmund's tunnels," says the Guardsman at his side. "He's armed."

"Good. It would be strange if he weren't," the Marshal replies. "Is Aster with him?"

"Not that we've seen."

Sorav's eye wanders from his target to the Crypsis agent tailing him, a pursuer that Mallory seems aware of and intent on losing. "Usher him up the third stairwell," he says. "I'll meet him in the hall. I don't want to make a fuss."

The Guard nods and disappears. Maximian eyes Mallory for another few strides, then retreats down the gallery into the dim green passages of the attendants' corridors. He can't name the emotion that boils in his breast, the anticipation of a reunion that both is and isn't their first. He wonders how many times they've met, how many times Mallory has shaken his hand, tipped his hat, passed him by unrecognized, how long he has been circling the Palas, and how closely. As the Marshal positions himself at the landing to the stairs, leaning between two pilasters, he has to force steadiness into his hands for the first time in many years.

He crosses his arms, watching the lamplit shadows for movement. Through the din of laughter and music and chiming glasses, he hears the click of shoes against marble, then footsteps disappearing into the softness of carpet. Something creaks, and a familiar smell meets his nose; an echo of Joyous Healing, a mélange of herbs and cigarettes and pitcher plant steam. He releases a breath, then takes another, tensing his jaw. The scent flickers, and when Mallory trots past, Sorav falls into step behind him.

"Ty," he says.

Mallory turns. Surprise darts across his face, then recognition. The look is familiar; Sorav has seen it many times on the faces of his assassins. First, the glint of determination when they see their target close and vulnerable, followed swiftly by triumph, then terror, then the abject helplessness of failure.

Mallory's hand darts to the saber at his side. He unsheathes only a quarter of it before Maximian pushes him against the wall, grasping the pommel and arresting his draw. Mallory resists on instinct, grip tightening over the hilt, but Maximian leans forward, one hand around his assailant's pommel, the other holding his wrist. Slowly, easily, he guides the steel back into its sheath.

"Eir vant Passand," he says. "It's nice to see you again."

Mallory stiffens, Tyro's defiance brightening his eye. He says nothing. With one arm trapped, he shifts his attack to his other. It's swift and utterly predictable, and Maximian can sense it well before it comes. With his left hand, he holds Mallory's sword arm, and with his right, he meets the weapon tilting toward his ribs.

He expects a pistol, a lead seven-shot like his last would-be murderer. He expects a bang, a flash of heat, and the ugly scent of gunpowder. He's almost relieved when he feels the cold point of a knife in his palm. The tip breaks through his glove, his skin, his muscle, and a refreshing shock of pain runs to his elbow. The blade stops halfway through his hand, and when Mallory twists it, ruthlessly, it scrapes against his bones with the satisfaction of a cracked knuckle.

"You think you're the first to try that?" Sorav asks. He pushes against the knife, shoving his palm down the widening blade, all the way to its base. He closes his fingers around the cross guard and holds it tight. "You forget who I am, princeling."

A sneer passes over Mallory's face. Trapped with both hands still around his blades, he tenses, shifts one foot, but doesn't move again. Maximian uses the moment of stillness to look him over, to study his gold-brown eyes, the petulant dimple on his chin.

He tightens his grip, leans in, and breathes Mallory's scent. He can't tell if it's a perfume or only a startling lack thereof, but he can make out the smoke of Three's workshop, the sour hint of BSPAF, the floral soap of the bathhouses, the sleepy tang of the siblings' sweat as they toss and turn beside him. Dawn shivers as the barracks close over his head, as he rises to the buzz of a firefly lamp, turning to watch Guy sleep in those precious few minutes before the Borisch & Sons jingle rings through the damp morning. Something tickles his cheek as he leans into Mallory, something more viscid than air. It almost burns his skin.

"Is this my perfumer's work?" he asks quietly.

"This is nothing," Mallory hisses, scent curling through bared teeth. Shadows flicker across his feral grin as the Tender Guard mounts the stairs, Crypsis at their heels. "You should see what else she's made for me."

Gravity tugs at Maximian's gut. With a painful shiver of metal, Mallory releases his hold on the knife, either withdrawing his hand for a strike, or to grope for a third weapon—the Marshal doesn't wait to find out. He takes a step back, turning his knife-pierced palm toward his assailant. Fingers clasped over the hilt, he whips it across Mallory's face, striking his temple. A jolt of fresh pain travels up Sorav's arm as the young man staggers. Without hesitation, Maximian strikes him again.

This time, as he falls against the wall, the Tender Guard advances. They grasp his elbows and shove him to the ground,

wrestling the sword from his hip. Maximian sighs, steps back, and extends his hand to the nearest Guard, who withdraws the knife.

"You'll need new gloves, Eir Marshal," he says.

"I suppose so," Sorav replies. He checks his sleeve, hand throbbing. "A jacket, too." He removes his gloves and flexes his bloody fingers, lamenting, for the thousandth time, Bertram's stubborn insistence on white uniforms.

Mallory, pinned on his stomach, does not resist as the Guard disarms him. One by one, his weapons are revealed and presented to the Marshal: his sword, his knife, a second knife, a straight razor, a derringer at his belt, a garrote in his pocket.

"Odd assortment," Maximian admits, looking over the saber. He passes it from his good hand to his injured, examining the opals in the pommel, the ancient symbol of Mongfestun hammered into the sheath. He can't help but ask. "Is this the one that killed my son?"

Cheek flattened under a Guard's knee, Mallory still manages to smile. "You gave it to me, Eir Marshal," he says. "Maybe you remember now?"

Cold rage streaks through Maximian, and he restrains himself from driving his shoe into Mallory's face. "We have a lot to talk about, Eir vant Passand. We can reminisce later."

Mallory grunts as the Guard yanks off his overcoat, then his embroidered dinner jacket. They haul him back to his feet, removing his hat, untying his cravat, slipping his belt from his waist, searching his silk blouse for handkerchiefs or embroidery needles or atomizers. When he is stripped of everything that could be construed as weaponry, they release him, and Crypsis steps forward to take their place. A handsome usher offers Mallory his arm, and a lady presses a silver gun to his back. His jaw tightens, his bare fists clench at his sides. A streak of the Marshal's blood stains his cheek.

"Wait," Sorav says. He pulls his sleeve over his wrist and wipes the droplet away. When he is done, he leans in, uninjured hand encircling the back of the young man's neck. "Listen to me, Eir Mallory vant Passand," he mutters. "This could go well for you. This could be a very happy night for your brother." He squeezes his nape. "Don't break his heart."

"You coward," Mallory hisses as Crypsis redirects him down the hall. As he cranes his neck over the gun at his shoulder, his snarl resembles a grin. "You fucking dog—"

"Don't forget the champagne," Maximian says, watching Crypsis escort him into the green-tinged dark. As they disappear toward the dressing rooms, he glances at the saber in his bleeding hand, at the crystals in the curved guard. With his thumb, he pushes the hilt upward, admiring the glint of a blade forged from the corpses of a dozen others. A symbol, the warden had told him, of reformation. Of all the stupid things to remember from that day.

A Tender Guardsman appears at his side. He turns, expecting a new pair of gloves, but the man carries only a carbine and a look of confusion. "What is it?" Maximian asks.

The Guard hesitates. "Best if you see for yourself, Eir Marshal."

★ ★ ★

In his private dressing room, the Chancellor dons and doffs his wedding jacket. Though he will not come onstage for several hours, not until the final act, he feels inexplicably hurried, uniquely unprepared. Curtain is in half an hour, and there is no sign of his antagonist. Without Mallory, without the catharsis of redemption or the glory of justice, the perfect kind of melodrama only Aufhocker can bring to life, the Chancellor's wedding will be nothing more than that. A boring ceremony with lively set dressing.

He walks through his vocal exercises as perfumers adorn him from head to foot. It does no good—the clouds of citrus and sleepbug pheromone are woefully insufficient. Though the bite on his thumb has long scabbed over, he feels as if it is splitting open, weeping through his glove. The Seamstress Laureate follows him as he paces around the room, altering his suit with sixteen deft fingers, each nail sharp as a pin. Every hem she loosens and redoes sits crookedly on his arm, every comb to his sideburns leaves them more frayed, and his perfumes seem to curdle on his skin. Even his goatee is fucked up.

"This won't do," he mutters, slipping from his jacket and handing it to the Seamstress. "Fuck it. Throw it away. Remake the whole outfit—make me a cloak instead. A long one. You can do it by the fourth act, can't you?"

"Eir Chancellor, I don't think—"

"I believe in you," he says. "You're wonderful, my dear. You're the woman with magic fingers." She exchanges a look with the newly appointed Perfumer Laureate. "Now, fuck off. All of you. Get out. And send in my barber. The least you animals can do is give me a decent shave."

He shoos the Seamstress with a friendly smile. The makeup artist follows her out the door, then the perfumers. As they spill into the hall, Bertram collapses in front of his mirror and examines himself. He is as handsome as he ever was, as young as he can possibly be at his age. Every blemish is skillfully concealed, every beauty accentuated. When he speaks, his voice is deep and rich.

“Fucking amateur hour,” he mutters.

A shadow passes outside the door. Someone knocks gently against the jamb.

“Come in,” he says. Three figures appear in the mirror. Two are suited with the defensive perfumes of Crypsis. The one between is smaller, leaner, disheveled. Scowl on his face, champagne in his hand, Mallory steps into the light, and Bertram breathes a sigh. “Thank God,” he says. “For a minute I was worried you might not show.”

He turns on his stool. He squints to see the little girl in the gentleman, and can’t. Tyro’s was only one dead face among so many others, unremarkable, a fruit unworthy of harvest. When he remembers that day, he does not remember her. He remembers Reames, dead and still growing, and the brood-parent, the last and only brood-parent, crippled and mutilated, exuding barely enough ecdytoxin to keep the movement afloat.

“Look at you,” Bertram says, dampening a flare of old anger. “Our little grub grew into quite the stag beetle.”

Mallory’s knuckles whiten over the stem of his glass. “You’re not the man I wanted to see tonight.”

“But you’re the man I wanted to,” Bertram says. “Oh, lose the pout. You’ll see Aufhocker soon enough. Once you’re attired properly, poor boy. I’ve never seen someone so tragically underdressed.”

“Blame your Marshal,” Mallory says.

“Glad to.” He smiles at one of the Crypsis agents. “Go catch the Seamstress, will you?”

The woman bows her feathered hat, conceals her derringer in her purse, and scuttles away. The other agent closes the door behind her, then leans against it, folding his arms.

“Well, Eir vant Passand,” says Bertram. “Sit down. Drink. You don’t come onstage until the end of the third act, so you might as well relax.”

Mallory sneers. “I figured you’d be plotting some convoluted shit.”

“Oh, of course. You know me. I wouldn’t let you just walk up to the Dramaturge Laureate. ‘Ease is the truest killer of satisfaction.’ You know that one?”

Mallory turns his glass in his hand. “No.”

“You disappoint me, young man. Vrenecker, forty-five.” He hums the melody, but Mallory doesn’t join. “Did Olaf not teach you that?”

A muffled shriek rattles past the door. Tempered as it is by glass and wood and the carpets of the twisted hall, Bertram can’t tell if it is laughter, or a scream. The Crypsis agent turns, peering through the tinted glass.

“Your friends are still making a ruckus out there,” Bertram says. “Those Extemporists—silly crowd, really. I’m curious to hear how the great Aufhocker’s kin fell in with the likes of them.”

“I’m sure you are,” Mallory says.

“Well, sit, then—you’re here, so you might as well regale me.” When Mallory doesn’t obey, Bertram dulls the edge in his voice with a wisp of kilterwort. “I mean it, Eir vant Passand. I’m eager to hear your story. Only half as eager as your brother, mind you. He’ll be so happy to see you. The whole city will. They’re going to adore you out there. You, my boy, are a Revivalist masterwork.”

Mallory grimaces, and another noise rumbles outside the door. The Crypsis agent lays one hand on the knob, the other reaching back to the holster on his belt. His perfume sours, suddenly on edge.

“Where *is* that seamstress?” the Chancellor mutters. “You’ll want to try on what she’s made for you, Eir vant Passand. It’s a stunning three-piece—though we have a gown, too, if you’d prefer that. I can imagine either as a crowd-pleaser. We’ll just see what looks best.”

Mallory says nothing, eyes moving to the door. Beyond the glass, the lights flicker. “It’s about time,” he mutters.

“What’s the matter, my dear?” Bertram asks.

Mallory offers a smile. A toothy, evil thing. “It’s starting.”

“Starting? Curtain’s not for another ten.”

Something rattles down the hall. Louder this time, it is not so much a noise as a kind of heated pressure. A sweet, burnt scent spills under the doorjamb: an odd mix of pheromones and allomones, enticing, negating, like a downward slope. Bertram’s stomach rises as if he is at the crest of a fall.

The Crypsis agent draws his sidearm. He grips the knob but doesn’t open the door, instead narrowing his eyes at the glass, preparing for whatever is on the other side—as he does, Mallory darts forward. He shatters his champagne flute against the wall and dives for the agent, broken stem outstretched. The Crypsis man turns, barely lifting his firearm before the jagged glass enters his throat. His perfume flares, burning with the defensive heat of pepperberry, but Mallory steps through it, withdrawing the glass in a spray of blood, only to thrust again, and again.

“Oh for fuck’s sake—” Bertram growls. “Don’t—”

The agent gropes for Mallory, fires, misses, discharging three bullets into the wall. They both crash against the door, scent of gunpowder sparking against perfume, enveloping them in a haze of acrid smoke. Four more shots ring out. Dust showers

from the perforated ceiling, and for a moment the two shadows fall still.

"God dammit," Bertram whispers.

Slowly, one of the figures stands. Mallory unfurls in the dust, and the agent slides to the carpet, leaving a streak of blood against the door. Dazed but unhurt, Mallory drops the emptied gun onto the corpse. Then he turns, shoes crunching the broken glass of the flute.

A thrill of terror runs up Bertram's spine. "All right, then," he breathes, smile soft with kinderflower. "I take it the champagne wasn't to your taste."

★ ★ ★

Sorav follows the young Guardsman down the stairs, his bloodied hand clenched around Mallory's saber. Two carabineers trot behind him as he rounds the landing and emerges into the green light of the vestibule. Well before he reaches the last step, he is hit with the strange smells of bloodwort and hellrat lymph and Tyro's unwashed hair. His heart drops, but his step doesn't falter.

The impresario meets them in the foyer, holding his wrist, babbling something about a sudden pop and a radiant heat. Though there is no blood, no soot or burned flesh, there is no perfume, either. Deprived of it, the man seems unmade, naked, *skinned,* almost. Sorav pushes past him, stepping toward the centerpiece, where a few Tender Guardsmen stand, shaking their heads in bewilderment.

Sorav looks over the taxidermy with narrowed eyes. Demetrius leans, outstretched arm offering an empty plate, his silhouette wriggling with loosened lines, as if he has been thoughtlessly sketched by a distracted artist. As Sorav circles him, the lines resolve to threads, fraying from every inch of his surface, weaving through his costume, through his ecdytoxin-cured skin, down his legs, up his neck. They unknot, untangle, unmake him, exuding the seething scent of Mallory. His face ripples with them, smile widening as he decays.

Sorav is unsure whether what he is witnessing is a creature, or a process. The Tender Guardsmen tighten their grips on their nozzles, waiting for orders to fumigate, exchanging timid whispers about what pesticide may address the threat. Even their commander is at a loss. The more Sorav examines the work, the more it awes him. Demetrius is a tense nidus of bioalchemy, eruptive, a bloated, glutted monster ready to burst open and daring anyone to help it along.

"That little shit," Sorav mutters, though not without some begrudging pride. A message, a distraction, a pulsating bomb—whatever Aster has accomplished here is beyond anything she has before.

"Orders, Eir Marshal?" a Tender Guard asks. He steps forward, gesturing toward Demetrius with the tip of his carbine—a little too close. The threads whip upward in response, launching a ripple of sweet-smelling heat toward him.

The Guard stumbles back. Sorav orders him to stand down, but he's already raised his barrel. He trips on his heel, aiming instinctively for the threads streaking toward him. Just as Sorav throws out an arm to redirect him, the soldier snaps open his cannula and sprays.

Ecdytoxic vitriol billows from his nozzle, and the air ignites. A constellation of light streaks from Demetrius upward, past his collar, his head, along the stream of the Guard's fumigant. The young man stoppers his cannula, but the process has already caught hold. He drops his nozzle and averts his mask as the reaction sweeps through the cloud of toxin, straight to the muzzle of his carbine.

Sorav throws himself back as the tank ruptures, impact ripping through metal, then leather, then flesh. He turns, shielding his face. His perfume sears his skin, and something snaps—a thousand little somethings, each a tiny thread of matter. The fabric of the foyer comes apart. Skeins of carpet pull free, spurting Ostlerfell dye. Tapestries dissolve, and Demetrius alights, not with flame, but with violent undoing, a foul-smelling combustion that climbs up to the arches, the chandeliers, the statuary blossoming from the marble.

The Guardsman screams, shaking off his tank. Sorav shuts his eyes against the fumes, grabs him around his shoulders and pulls him away from the reaction, away from the centerpiece, between the columns of disintegrating Revivalist statuary. The billowing light crawls after them, igniting the traces of ecdytoxin in stone and fabric and glass.

One fist clenched around the Tender Guard's uniform, the other around Mallory's saber, Sorav feels the reaction lick at his wounded hand, searing his skin, boiling his blood up to his elbow. Teeth clenched, he and the two other Guards drag the injured man through the house doors. He slams them shut, pulling down the gold latch as a wheeze of smoke spills from under them.

Sorav takes a deep breath and rests his throbbing hand against the wood. He examines his broken skin for a moment, still oozing silver-tinged blood. His heart inverts when a single red thread crawls across his knuckles and starts to burrow into the wound.

"Marshal."

He doesn't panic. He pulls the thread from his skin and flicks it away.

"Eir Marshal, what happened?"

He turns. The rearmost guests huddle toward him, emitting a purr of nervous pleasure that drowns out the tuning orchestra. Ladies lift their eyepieces when they spy the injured man, gentlemen crane their necks over the hats of their dates. Ushers freeze in their tracks.

"Bar the doors," he tells the two carabineers. "Every door. No one comes in or out. Spray nothing." He clenches his burning hand. "Where's the Chancellor?"

"Still in his dressing room," says one of the men, leaning over his wounded comrade.

"Escort him out the rear doors. Him and vant Passand, if he's still there." Sorav scans the house. A thousand years of assassination attempts have ensured there are no direct stairways from the orchestra to the boxes. With his command dispersing through the Guard, with each of them barring the house doors, the only way up is backstage. He eyes the catwalks overhead, bulbous with lighting, and his exterminator's instinct summons a picture of a phloem channel and its many decaying walkways.

"You," he tells the remaining carabineer, "are coming with me."

"Eir Marshal?"

Sorav straightens, stepping over the injured soldier. "We're getting Aufhocker to safety."

The crowd's antennae perk up at the name. Sorav pushes his way through them, brushing aside their queries with curt reassurances and the occasional threat. He weaves between tables and chairs and questions, blood still boiling, furious pain streaking up from his hand to his elbow. His eyes burn, his perfume smolders on his skin, sparking against every other scent as a hundred guests swarm him, hungry for information, for Aufhocker.

Once or twice he glances over his shoulder, looking for the shadow of Olaf in his box, but sees nothing through the sea of bodies, through the haze of perfume, the echo of Mallory's scent still searing his brain. Without fumigants to disperse the crowd, he relies on his voice and the butts of his Guards' carbines. His commands to make way go unheeded, his violent nudges barely move them. Eventually, he unsheathes Mallory's saber.

When the Sommelier Laureate grasps his shoulder, demanding to know what is happening, he shoves him away, drawing the blade across the man's arm. Scandalized titters travel from throat to throat as the Sommelier falls back into the crowd, and finally, they part.

Sorav marches past the terrified conductor and mounts the stage. He hurries through the open curtain, through the scrim and into the rear wing, trotting past the bridesmaids and flower boys, until he runs into the Chancellor's bride.

Elspeth turns in her explosion of ivory and roses, eyes bright. When she speaks, her perfume can't hide the glee in her voice. "What's happening?" she asks. "What's going on?"

"You're leaving," he says. "Out the back. My lieutenant will escort you."

"Oh, no," she says. "I have to stay, Eir Marshal. It's my big day—"

"Don't fucking start, Schölin. Not now." He grabs her wrist and shoves her to a nearby Guardsman. "Get her out the stage doors."

She struggles, and almost breaks free of the Guard when a strange sound tears across the theater. Not a rumble, not an explosion, but something higher-pitched, sharper. Maximian turns, glancing back toward the stage, up through the catwalks, through the jungle of Revivalist statuary. For a moment, everything stills. Then, deep in the walls of the Opera, deep inside himself, he feels a seam rip open.

★ ★ ★

The dressing room is still. Mallory stands over the dead man, brow furrowed, one hand clutching his opposite wrist. Lights ripple past the door, casting striped shadows under the jamb.

"Are you hurt, Eir vant Passand?" the Chancellor starts. "Let's get you cleaned up. I'll send for Dr. Whyck."

"Not necessary, Eir Chancellor," Mallory says. Grimacing, he pulls a shard of glass from his hand. The fabric of his glove tears open—or seems to, until Bertram realizes he is not wearing gloves. Red as blood, threads spill from the bare flesh of his palm. They rise in the charged air, and another shiver runs through Bertram.

"Of course," he continues, tempering his voice, "if you prefer, you can take the stage a bit roughed up. I can see the appeal. You've been on quite a journey to get here—why not look it?"

Mallory doesn't reply. He reaches out, hand steady, and locks the door. A strange scent sours the air, but Bertram can't tell if it comes from Mallory or seeps in from outside. What he can tell, in only half a breath, is the mastermind behind it.

"That's quite a fragrance, Eir vant Passand. Did Vralen Vost make it for you?"

Finally, the young man lifts his eyes.

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" the Chancellor sighs. "I have thirty-eight perfumers on staff and their efforts combined can

barely outcompete her."

Mallory straightens. "She is talented."

"I made a mistake letting Max have that one," Bertram admits. "I didn't think she'd live. She struggled in the Sanitarium, for a while. A victim of the Overture Skirmish—not many survived that. And the ones that did—well, the things they created were … ugly. That battle wasn't our best work."

"I know," Mallory replies. "I helped Reames make the grenades." A twitch of a smile passes over his mouth. "That toxin was distilled from Merrett sketches and blight scorpion, if I remember."

"A bold combination," Bertram says. He wrinkles his nose as a strange smell passes under the door to the hall. Shadows streak by, too swiftly, like those cast by flames. "The early days weren't quite as grand as in our stories, were they?"

"No."

"You know, Eir vant Passand," the Chancellor begins cautiously, "it's been a while since we've had an avenger. We used to get them every season. Contaminated, or displaced, or what have you. Even some factory kids like you."

"Really," Mallory breathes.

"Embarrassing, honestly. Revenge is such a sad attempt to stay relevant." He smiles, bringing a warm hint of cinnamon to the edge of his tone. "They dropped off after a few years. The toxin always does its work eventually. But you—you're different. Resilient. You took a dip in the Catoptric and lived. Not many can say that."

"I have Reames to thank," Mallory says. "A few weeks working under him and I was contaminated to the bone. The water was nothing. Pleasant, even."

"*Please.*" Bertram laughs. "You lie just like your brother, kid."

Mallory smiles. He eyes the corpse, then the door, then the empty gun.

"Well, young man?" Bertram asks pleasantly. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm considering … you know. How I'm going to do it. If I want to ritualize this whole thing. I think it'll feel nice. Drag you onstage and kill you there, so my brother can watch. Get creative with the implements, like *The Price of Beauty.*"

"*Price of Beauty?* No, my dear. This whole scenario is much closer to *Bast Street Butcher.* Take the straight razor there and—right across the throat. No, too quick, isn't it? Ease and satisfaction and all that." Bertram smiles, shaping the air with his tone, with his tongue, readying his sting. "Well, in any case, do me a favor first. Help me fix this fucking goatee. They can find me dead, but they won't find me undergroomed."

Mallory laughs, compelled by the notes of kilterwort. "All right."

"That's the spirit, kid." The Chancellor's heart steadies when he feels Mallory's will start to bend under his words. "Where'd you learn to shave, anyway? Mongfestun?"

"My brother."

"He was a good man. Well, comparatively, I suppose. He probably never told you about half the shit he did. He was an exterminator at heart, as brutal as the rest of them. He killed men and women, parents, brothers and sisters—but when it came to his own, he was selfish. He loved you. He still does. He dedicates all his works to you. Did you know that? 'To a lost princeling.' Printed at the beginning of every libretto. Drives fans mad trying to figure out who it is." Bertram reaches for the razor on the vanity. He feels the tendrils of his perfume pull at Mallory's edges, he feels his anger softening. "All those terrible things. He did it all for you. He killed and mutilated for you. He shot his best friend for you. He murdered my nephew for you. A love like that is a wonder to behold. Lather the soap, will you?"

Mallory bends under Bertram's perfume, succumbing to the shape of his words, a sculpture of breath. He reaches for the soap tin, and Bertram releases a sigh.

"You want to see him again, don't you?" he says. "And you can. We can make this work out. There, good, that's enough lather." He opens the razor and reaches for Mallory. "They're all betting against you, you know. They're betting Max will kill you onstage, those bloodthirsty pigs. You want to prove them wrong. You want this whole show to go well, don't you? Reunite with your brother, make everything right."

Mallory pauses, suspended over the soap tin. Gorslung tightens his grip on the razor.

Then, Mallory laughs. His scent snaps, falls away—Bertram opens his mouth, trying to redirect the air, but suddenly there is a shoe on his chest. He falls to the floor, and the straight razor flies from his hand. He gasps, lands on his back, struggling to reclaim the blade. Mallory's hand closes around it, and Bertram tries to raise his arms. Mallory catches his wrist, kneels on it, bending it under his weight. Gorslung shouts, resists, then succumbs to a painful snap. A fist strikes his face. He gasps, tries to wriggle away, tries to bend his scents, but he can only moan as his lips and teeth are pried apart and the razor enters his open mouth.

"You're not getting me on that fucking stage," Mallory growls.

Bertram moans, tongue pushing against Mallory's fist as it pries his jaw open. He tries to speak, but his voice is muffled in the twisting onslaught of hungry threads. He shuts his eyes, and his tongue is pinched, pulled—then the sharp taste of blood fills

his mouth as Mallory begins to cut.

★ ★ ★

History has proven time and time again that theaters are made to burn. The truism is one of those rare ones attributed not to Vrenecker, but to Drovick, a defense he offered during his fifth criminal trial, when a particularly charged performance of *Faustech* left the Opera, and four neighboring buildings, in ashes. As ominous as it is obvious, that knowledge lies rooted in the heart of every theatergoer, every usher and director and socialite: a seed of anxiety ready to sprout, like the hardy Smoke Moon shrubs, at the first sign of fire.

When the Marshal Revenant pushes his way through the crowd, swatting patrons with his unsheathed saber, the dread takes root. When, a few moments later, his Tender Guard surrounds the perimeter, closing every door to the auditorium, it springs upward. Unease blossoms in the Marshal's wake, spreading from the rearmost orchestra as he pushes up to the apron, leaping to the foreground of bouquets and disappearing into the left wing. Conversation falls still, glasses cease their clinking. Every nose lifts for the scent of smoke, every eye for the glow of flames, every ear for the characteristic crack and rumble of boiling Tiliarder wood. The house lights flicker. A weightless anticipation suspends the guests in silence, half poised to run, half poised to witness what comes next.

For a moment, the fumes circling the auditorium fall still. They pool in the foyer, along the emptied halls, permeating the staircases like blood in capillaries, ready for the next surge of a heartbeat. In this suspended second, Mallory exits the dressing room, bloodied to his elbows. He steps into a haze thick as soup, the externalized distillation of his own essence. Before he trots up the stairs toward the boxes, before he flees the footfalls of oncoming Tender Guardsmen, he breathes in Aster's genius for the last time. He can almost feel his bodiless self spread, curling under every door to the auditorium, grasping at the trails of perfumes inside, brushing farewell against Aster's lips as she wheezes through the dark. He drops Bertram's tongue at his feet. When he releases a satisfied laugh, his breath rends the air.

The house is overtaken, though not by flame; the light that curls from under the jambs is cold, and the smell that billows through the air isn't smoke, only the stench of a thousand perfumes souring at once. A feeling of negation, of disintegration, rips through the crowd. Matter itself bends, uncanny as gravity reversing course.

Order dissolves. Guests in the rear push forward, and those in the front push back. Wine spills, drunken sways become hurried trots, then panicked sprints. Crypsis agents emerge from the audience, from the cast, drawing their firearms as the crowd swarms the proscenium. A wave of bodies crashes against the stage, scrambling up the apron, leaping for the footlights and tumbling into the orchestra pit. A cluster of cuffed Extemporists escapes captivity, shrieking their rallying cries, and the lucky spectators in the boxes lean in for a better view.

Elspeth sees none of it, but she hears it all. Trapped in the wing with her wrist in the grip of the Tender Guardsman, she hears a faint rumble, a chorus of gasps, the slamming of doors all around the theater, the hiccup of the orchestra, the Grand Marshal's resonant baritone. When a collective gasp rushes toward the stage, when the sound of a hundred bodies drums against the hollow wood, she feels the Guardsman loosen his hold. She manages to pull away, stumbling center stage, into the heart of the chaos. The Guard follows, shouting threats at the oncoming crowd, but they ignore him, driving forward to safety. The Marshal's voice bellows in from the wing, but the Guard fails to obey his superior's command. His nozzle snaps open and the stench of fumigants envelops the stage, an ecdytoxic suspension of aqua fortis and pepperberry.

Elspeth doesn't run, doesn't move. She stares to the rear of the orchestra, where threads of light spiral from cracks in the statuary. Fumes devour the ecdytoxin in the walls, a billion combustive pinpricks running along the topography of faces, of flowers, of Revivalist symbols and stories. She can see every particle of stone and wood, every line, every shape, every pose and color brighten and die, joyful with decay. It is no fire, but it burns her eyes like one, and as she devours the cursed beauty, unblinking, she realizes that she does not care if this is the last thing she ever sees.

The fume is perfection. Synesthetic, uncapturable, uninterpretable, irreproducible. A beauty as fleeting as it is destructive, it is without doubt the first real masterpiece of Extemporism.

"Not bad, Aster," she breathes.

As panic encircles her, she struggles downstage. She sidles through the crowd, past Guards trying to control them, bodies, and bodies, and more bodies, long-coated and feather-hatted, waving wineglasses and lorgnettes and nozzles. They are nothing but shadow puppets at the edges of her vision, negated silhouettes against a backdrop of brilliance. As they scramble past, their fragrances flee with them, thrashing in the onslaught of hungry fumes. She wonders, as she stares at the scene, if they know what they are witnessing, if they too can see the beauty of this eerie process, a righteous spectacle so ahead of its time it seems to undo time altogether.

She supposes not. If these dunces could recognize good art, they wouldn't be fleeing it so desperately.

She scans the scene for the woman of the hour, the master of the work. Her burning eyes dart to her left, then her right, then

up to the balconies, searching for Aster, for Mallory, and, a little indulgently, for Aufhocker, just to see what Tiliard's beloved bard might make of all this—and sees nothing but angry fumes. Then, she glances under her feet.

Aster's shape is not made of light, or sound, or even odor. It doesn't meet Elspeth's eyes so much as tunnel directly into her mind, refusing to be filtered or modified by flawed human senses. Streaks of color pour straight into her blood: lips burning a sordid pink, a curl of gold hair, a blue-green jolt of relief when Aster raises one arm and beckons her downward. She laughs and follows, until her shoe meets the lip of the stage's infamous trapdoor.

Don't you dare, she tells herself. *Don't you dare do something so goddamn Vaughnian as running off in your wedding dress.*

But she can't help it. The floor creaks under her, and joy squeaks up her throat. Chaos rustles every frill and bead in her gown, wilting the flowers at her waist, dissolving the spiderwebs in her hair. She spins to face upstage, watching the clouds billow and glow, bullets arcing overhead like shooting stars. She sees the lunar priest stumble across the stage with her vows, perforated with light; she sees a pair of bridesmaids fall, glowing souls shaking loose from their bodies. And she sees the Marshal Revenant. She can make out his features for the first time, the somber angle of his jaw, his high cheekbones, the glint of blood pouring down his arm, burning silver as he roars for order. Furious, he thrusts his saber into the stage and plucks a rifle from the Guard beside him, turning toward the crowd and lifting it to his shoulder.

Elspeth doesn't know if he aims at her or beyond her, but she never finds out. A crack deafens her, and the floor disappears. Blinded once again, she tumbles down—*straight* down, encased by the metal walls of the immolation chute. She is sure the heat on her face, boiling her perfume, is her death, that the pressure fluttering against her skin is the lick of flame, but as her feet burst through chicken wire and soft feathers and flesh, she realizes she is only tumbling through the captive doves. She shrieks, racked with horrified laughter, tears flying in crystalline streaks from her eyes, until she lands, unharmed on a bed of mangled birds, in hell.

★ ★ ★

Aufhocker watches the chaos unfold, wine in one shaking hand. Clouds of ecdytoxin swallow the stage; the curtains ripple, the scene warps, gas glows down the proscenium. Flower boys dance away from the percussion of gunfire, and the Marshal appears, one hand holding a saber, the other reaching for a rifle. Though not as young as he had been during the Revival, he is just as beautiful, lit perfectly by the scintillations of ecdytoxin and gunpowder.

Resisting every urge to run, Hock watches the clouds rise in his direction. He closes his eyes, flinching at the burn of his own perfume in his nose.

"Fuck," he mutters, just as the Tender Guard beside him does the same.

The soldier lifts his carbine and clicks open his cannulas, and Hock turns to see gaseous streaks of light spill from under the door. He gasps, steps back, grasping the balustrade as a strange, glowing smoke curls from the jamb. The ghostly fingers close into a fist; a dark line runs up the center of the wood, and splinters start to peel away, soft and thin as thread.

The Guard raises his nozzle and fires. A small ecdytoxic canister flies from the barrel of his firearm and burrows into the widening crack. The fingers of scent alight, instantaneously burning backward through the bullet's trajectory, all the way to the mouth of the gun. The carbine rips in half, splitting from the sight to the stock—then continues splitting, straight through the Guard's shoulder, his neck, the tank on his back. He screams, falls, torn nearly in half.

Hock covers his face against the bite of acrid air, white-hot sound ripping through the scar on his ear. When the throbbing relents, he dares to lower his hands, to open his eyes and squint into the hall. Someone is there; someone is speaking to him.

"Em."

There, enveloped in warped shadows and glowing dust, is a gentleman: handsome and wiry and a bit haggard, he is everything Guy had promised Tyro, and everything Hock had hoped for. His bearing is elegant, his smile lopsided, and he is soaked in blood.

Hock blinks, sure the world is lying to him. He considers the possibility he is already dead, fallen from the balcony, choked to death on the strange gas. This image, this silhouette is only another trick of the light, a hallucination in the chaos, cast from the dissolving stone and wood and floristry around him. But he can't deny the smell, strong, familiar, beloved.

"Oh. Mal." A laugh and a sob battle in his throat—he can't move, can't blink, can't find the words to ask any of the questions searing through his mind. For the moment, he doesn't care to. "Oh, princeling."

When he finally takes his brother in his arms, he is astounded by the solidity of him, the reality of him. "God," he breathes. "Shit. God. God dammit."

"Words of a Laureate," Mal mutters.

Hock can only squeeze him tighter, breathing him in as the balcony rumbles. His scent is perfect, clear, stronger than the streaks of gas devouring the walls, tearing apart everything in their path. "Shit, grease-beetle," he says. "All this blood—"

"Tale for another night, Em."

Hock dares to release his brother. "God, look at you. I'm so … so sad I didn't get to see you grow. But I'm so glad I get to see you grown."

Mallory holds Hock's hand against his cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner. I wanted to come sooner."

"Oh, Mal. No, I'm—I swear I tried to keep you out of all this. I really tried."

"Don't beat yourself up. It wasn't wrong. Just pointless."

Somewhere behind them, a ruff of gunfire precedes a chorus of screams. Olaf glances back to the clouds of ecdytoxin, the bodies trampling the scenery. "I didn't write this, Mal," he feels compelled to say.

"I know. You're witnessing the first piece of Extemporist theater."

"Not to my taste."

"Then let's go. There will be a lot more like this to come." He glances toward the splintered door and the glowing fumes beyond. "I've got a cabin waiting for us. A whole boat, actually. Not the *Bastion Rose,* but it's nice enough." He takes his brother's hand in his own. "Come on. We're already quite a few years late, Eir Emmory."

As Mallory pulls him gently, firmly, toward the doorway, threads tickle his skin, crawling out from the lacerations in his brother's palm. They twist up his sleeve, gently brushing his burning tattoos, but they do not bite. The brothers step into the blazing hallway right as the next volley of gunfire rings out, and the balcony lurches, creaks, and gives way.

Light closes over him. He expects to be deafened by dissonance, for his head to flare with that violent, ecdytoxic music, but as he holds Mallory's hand and descends into the fumes, for the first time in many, many years, there is only blessed silence.

★ ★ ★

Swarming with panic and gas and bodies, the Tiliard Opera swells from the front of house to the back. The stage doors swing open, the loading-dock gates rattle upward, but not fast enough to prevent a fatal bottleneck. The crowd tramples and claws their way to safety, backing up to the wings, to the stage. Spectators leap from the boxes, the balconies, into the orchestra. Technicians climb up the catwalks to smash the rear windows; the cast dissolves into the secret passageways of the crossover.

Speechless with horror, a young Bertram Gorslung watches his older self stumble from the dark, tripping over the groundrow toward the doors. Escorted by an entourage of Crypsis and Tender Guard, the Laurel Chancellor barely stays afloat in the sea of bodies. He claws toward his Marshal, moaning over the screams of his guests, through the blood gurgling from his lacerated mouth. The bleeding is profuse, and his orders even more so, wordless and animal and muddled in a soup of rotting perfume and sheer panic. He holds one broken arm to his chest and swings the other, commanding Sorav to clear the way for him.

The Marshal sweeps the fleeing crowd, unsure who to kill first. Crypsis agents fire blindly, agonized by their igniting perfumes. Traitors and opportunists and Extemporists peel from the cast, from the audience, rallying, dying, falling and rising again. Even Franz Sreckt, looking both horrified and ecstatic, emerges from the crowd as one of his cronies adorns him with a golden respirator. Margraves, betting men, and usurpers howl in terror or triumph. The entire house is filled with vermin.

Sorav raises his eyes to the boxes. His rifle follows, and briefly, before the next gust of fumes overtakes him, he sees Hock. The man has his back to the stage, and before him stands his little brother.

Blind to the chaos around them, the two embrace, and for a moment, Sorav has both in his sights. Carefully, he shifts his aim to Mallory. When the brothers part and turn toward the doorway, his finger curls over the trigger. His hand burns. Blood writhes through his palm, threading hot along every tendon. He readies, waits, metal bending in the tightening crook of his forefinger.

Then, right before he fires, Hock turns. He shifts, looking over his little sibling, and Maximian sees his face—too clearly in the flickering toxins, he sees his tearful eyes, the wide smile under his beard, the same that he used to wear in the barracks when he and Tyro would count the boats passing underfoot. For the first time in many years, he sees Guylag alive.

Trapped on the apron of the stage, Dawn lowers his firearm.

THE LAST POET-KING

Considered for decades to be a timeless performance, if only in the literal sense, the first and last production of *The Marriage of Bertram* ends the moment it begins. As soon as the show is set to start, the cast and crew and audience spill from the stage doors, ejected in a screaming rush of fumigants and gunfire. The Opera exhales like a protracted cough, expelling a breath of rot and dissolution. From afar, the building seems to glow as it unravels, prompting the journalists waiting in the cracks of Conundrum to jot another notch in the Opera's record, the thirteenth time it is besieged to destruction (or fourteenth, counting the incident of the mad Marshal Nathaniel Thwart). Cameramen hurry to capture the historic moment, or what's left of it, only to later watch their film dissolve in the developer; poets scribble all they see, spilling unreadable nonsense into their notebooks; musicians struggle to comprehend the cacophony as it dissipates into the blushing Rut Moon night. In the turbulent years to come, hundreds will try to re-create, or merely describe, the theatrical masterpiece of Asteritha Vost. They will try to intellectualize the bizarre void of ground on which the Opera once stood, try to narrate the epic tragedy that broke the heart of the city. They will create a thousand poems and paintings and plays depicting the immolation of Olaf Aufhocker—but in the end, none can capture it. The moment the work begins, it begins to dissolve.

It defies words, defies images; it is a one-act negation of structure, of logic, an opera devoid of its prima donna, a wedding its bride, though no one notices that Elspeth Schölin has gone missing until the art columnist for the *Arbuscle* publishes his opinion piece the next day, describing her elopement, and the fumes that facilitated it, as "a performance as pedestrian as it is nonsensical."

"A harrowing, profound statement," counters the *Rhizosphere* in the first issue they've printed since the Revival.

"An invitation for the Marshal Revenant to retaliate," warns the *Lunar Herald,* "when he emerges from the dust—if it can even be called dust."

Aster doesn't care much for what the papers say, at any moment, but especially not this one. As *The Marriage of Bertram* falls apart above her, she is mostly concerned with wading through the pile of bones and beaks and feathers in the depths of hell. She gropes through the dark, grasping at the hem of a silk dress, at the rapidly wilting flowers of a headpiece, the smooth gauze of a spiderweb veil. Her heart turns, then settles when she feels a body stir, a cheek tighten in a smile.

"God," Elspeth moans, struggling to sit upright in her soft bed of dead and dying birds. "My fucking back."

"Free drinks for life, El," Aster says.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I come to a show. Help me up." She rolls through the pile of feathers, the pleats of her silks, hand reaching for Aster's. They meet and interdigitate, diamond knocking against emerald. As she struggles down from the bar, Elspeth turns Aster's hand in her own, laying her lips against the inside of her wrist. "God," she breathes. "That was fucking brilliant. I could see it. Everything. I still can. *Magnificent.*"

"I hoped you'd like it," Aster says. "Though I still think it could've used some more time to simmer."

"*Time*—fuck time. This is your best work yet."

Elated, terrified, they stare at one another through the gray-blue dust of shredded feathers. Both know better than to ask what happens next. It is a pointless question, and an insult to the brilliance of Aster's work. They know to cling to this brief peace, to bask in their own destructive glory; from now on, every moment will be their last.

"Let's snag a bottle while we're here," says Elspeth. "Celebrate my unmarriage."

Guided by the unseen light of the destruction over their heads, Elspeth moves through the dark, parting the corpses of her wedding doves. Shuffling along a bar emptied of clientele, she steals whatever she can. Aster urges her along when a column of fumes billows down the immolation chute.

"Did you come with Mal?" Elspeth asks, tucking a bottle of sulfur gin under her arm.

"I did," Aster answers. "But I think he left with someone else."

"Isn't that the way," Elspeth laughs. When she takes Aster's arm, she is still trembling, with joy or fear or pain or a bit of each. As the Opera rumbles above them, ripping apart at the seams, they make their way through the dark. Constrained by her dress, Elspeth hops like a small dog trying to keep pace with its walker.

"Here, let me lead," she says. "Don't worry. I can see everything. The light is pouring down—or, not light, but—" As she leans against Aster, limping on one sore leg, she shifts her eyes upward. "I'm sad you can't watch it with me. There goes the foyer, poor Demetrius. And the auditorium—hah, no great loss. You know what I always say."

"What do you always say?"

"Musical theater is the lowest form of human expression."

Aster laughs. "You've never said that."

"Sure I have. It's not my fault you didn't hear."

When they reach the labyrinthine safety of Sigmund's tunnels, Elspeth turns, occasionally glancing up to watch the birth of a movement. As a part of Aster wilts with envy, another part swells with pride. She knows that whatever Elspeth sees only Elspeth will see, and only fleetingly.

They slip up into the alleyways by Conundrum, panting, terrified, exchanging tense whispers and occasional giggles. Rats flee at their passing. A nest of third-eye moths flutters over their heads, dusting hallucinatory powder over the girls as they sidle along the bricks, conjoined at the hands. Aster follows Elspeth away from the seething void, equally blind to what transpires behind her as what might transpire ahead. Her stomach flutters in her throat, weightless at the crest of gravity. Deep in her lungs, she feels the cold tightening of a wheeze.

Soon enough, Crypsis will be on their tail, stripped of perfume but not of bullets—followed by the Guard, by the Marshal, the Chancellor or someone else entirely, some military debutant waiting for a day like this to grasp the levers of power and crank that mill once again. In an hour, a week, a century, order will restore itself, and the wheel of Tiliard will grind Aster's bones like the rest of them. But for now, she clings to Elspeth, unwilling to think of the future, unwilling to consider anything but the heat of glory at her back and the feel of a familiar hand in hers. She can only pray that she, like the brothers vant Passand, will be lost in the smoke, if only for a moment—cockroaches small enough to escape the crushing notice of history.

★ ★ ★

Unsure if he is dead or only still dreaming, Emmory wakes on a thin, soft bed. The room is small and unlit, but the darkness has none of the same damp heaviness of his cell in Strangleroot. There is movement in the air, and the floor rumbles with the groan of sugar-motors. He rises, shakes a small torch to life, and blue light fills the cabin. He has no sense of the hour, or the date, but that is usual for him. He has spent the past seventeen years adrift in darkness.

Emmory slips on his shoes, rolls up his sleeves, and gropes past the stacked boxes of contraband to the ladder. He opens the latch above him and climbs onto the deck. Gray light floods his vision, and he squints against the sky. The pink blush of Rut Moon glows through the misty sunrise. A few of the crew are at work; several stop to glance at his blackened arms, raising eyebrows at the cost of his passage. They make no comment. A paid fare is a fare paid, as the captain always says.

At the stern, under the angular shafts of morning light, Mallory leans over the handrail. He's not wearing his gentleman's clothes, but one of the bishop's housecoats, refitted as a traveling cloak. A frayed hat dangles in his hand, whipping in the morning wind.

Emmory approaches, suddenly afraid the man will turn and show him the face of a stranger, that Mallory will disappear over the side of the boat, and he will wake up in his cell, victim to a cruel and tempting dream.

"Mal," he croaks.

Mallory glances over his shoulder. His eyes are bright, his frown familiar. Relief spills through Emmory as he leans over the rail beside his brother.

"Careful," Mal says. "You'll fall in."

"Don't be grim." Emmory raises his hand to his brother's cheek. There is a wide abrasion on his chin, from which a cluster of dark threads grows, evenly, as if he had missed a spot shaving that morning. Emmory moves to his hair, tucking a windswept curl behind his ear. "It's clean," he says. "It's finally clean. I can't believe it."

"Shut it, Em," Mal says, and Emmory can't help himself. He pulls his brother into his arms, rocking a little.

"What, will I embarrass you in front of your friends?"

Mallory laughs. His smell is thick, the fog thicker; either it is going to be a cool day, or they have already crossed the misty river of the dead. He decides he doesn't really care which is true.

"You look good with a beard," Mallory says.

"Thank you. It's usually not this nice. It was … a lot stickier in Strangleroot."

"Everything is."

Emmory releases his brother, but still clings to his hand. It is so much larger, so much stronger than when he'd last held it. He wants to take off Mallory's glove and examine every change, every cut and callus, but he only turns back to the water. They stand in silence for a while. Mallory's eyes scan their wake, and Emmory knows he is looking for smoke, the ripple of a pursuer.

"I imagine we've been added to the *Manual* by now," Emmory says.

"If there still is a *Manual,*" Mal answers. He dons his hat with an evil curl of his lip. "I'll send out a few letters when we

get to Dagdrun. See what a mess Aster's made of Tiliard."

Emmory breathes a sigh. "Who finally taught you to write, Mal?"

"Father Davide Bateusse."

"Did he?"

"I understand he was your patron. Of a sort." Mallory glances at him. "There's a lot you haven't told me, Em."

He hesitates, unsure where to start. "I'll tell you my half if you tell me yours."

"All right. So long as there aren't any songs."

Emmory laughs. He waits for his ear to flare with pain, with music, but all he hears is the soft breath of the wind. "Fine. I've been thinking of moving on to prose, anyway."

He closes his eyes, helpless to stop the shiver that runs through him. After so many years of imprisonment, with the valley and all its history confined to his head, then his cell, then a stage, he is struck with terror that the clouds will lift, and he will see a world too vast and too real to comprehend.

He squeezes Mallory's hand, feeling weightless, unspooled, like a fiber flung from the spinning wheel. When he opens his eyes, the mist still lies heavy over the boat. He can't see the shores of the Catoptric, he can't see Tiliard at all, but he knows, somewhere beyond his grasp, undying and unfathomable, the city turns, and turns, and turns.

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Also by **HIRON ENNES**

Leech

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